

DOCTORAL THESIS

African Women as Mothers and Persons in Rhetoric and Practice: A Critical Study of African Womanhood, Maternal Roles, and Identities in Theological and Cultural Constructs in the Roman Catholic Tradition

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**African Women as Mothers and Persons in Rhetoric and
Practice: A Critical Study of African Womanhood, Maternal Roles, and
Identities in Theological and Cultural Constructs in the Roman
Catholic Tradition**

by

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Abstract

Title: African Women as Mothers and Persons in Rhetoric and Practice: A Critical Study of African Womanhood, Maternal Roles, and Identities in Theological and Cultural Constructs in the Roman Catholic Tradition

This thesis adopts maternal well-being as a prism for studying the roles and identities of African women. It critically analyzes the dynamics in culture and religion that militate against women's quest for fullness of life.

As its methodology, it adopts narratives of African women as a source and means of theological research based on the anthropological model. This method prioritizes the voices and humanity of previously silenced, excluded, and oppressed women and their conditions of maternal mortality, poverty, and oppression rooted in gender biases and patriarchal stereotypes.

Theology has largely ignored the reality of maternal mortality evidenced by the paucity of theological materials. A consequence of the neglect and ignorance of this critical factor is the chasm between the rhetorical use of feminine and maternal symbolisms to represent and define the significance of women in church and society and the concrete realities that confront them as women.

Bridging this gap necessitates identifying exemplary icons and models of maternal leadership and wisdom in scripture, traditions, and cultural practices to redefine the status, identity, and role of women. It also entails recognizing and harnessing the unique gifts, qualities, and spirituality of African women for the edification of church, transformation of society, and flourishing of humanity.

Of salience is the practice of maternal leadership as a source of a new ethos for church and society through women's capacities and contributions, though a patriarchal mind-set imposes biological motherhood as the sole criterion for defining women's existence and relevance. Maternal leadership and wisdom liberated from a reductionist, biological understanding of motherhood and the highlighting of incarnated roles and identities inspired by maternal values represent innovative and original aspects of this thesis.

Only by listening to voices of women can church and society develop a more just, liberating, and inclusive understanding of womanhood and motherhood. Nothing substitutes for the voices of women.

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Introduction

“A Bird Cannot Fly on One Wing”: Approaching the Bridge and Minding the Gaps

The standpoint from which we view an object determines what we see in the person or object ... Where we stand and where we locate the issue greatly determines how we see, judge and respond to it. Often the question of women in the Bible is viewed as a female issue, by both men and women. The issue concerns the nature, status and role of women in Church and society in relation to men, “the other half” of humanity. Genesis 1:26–27 reports that God created the human species “male and female” in the divine image and likeness. If they are equal in nature, what practical implications does this hold for both men and women in their perception as a sex, their mutual relationship and in all fields of human endeavor?¹

Nigerian theologian Teresa Okure’s remarks eloquently frame the intents and purposes of this thesis. Especially in African cultures, in church and in society, gender looms large as a neuralgic—albeit rarely and freely discussed—issue because of doctrinal, ideological, and cultural constructs and constraints imposed by political and ecclesiastical leadership.

Varieties of cultural attitudes in Africa toward women reinforce and exacerbate these blocks. Official internal narratives of the Catholic Church (such as the first African synod in 1994 and the second African synod in 2009) wax eloquently about women constituting the “backbone” of the church.² In reality, however, they are the least recognized in regard to ministry, participation in leadership, and decision making. This gap between rhetoric and practice in regard to the treatment of many African women, whose voices are suppressed, gifts denied, and options restricted in the context of ministry, leadership, and decision making opens a rich terrain for critical inquiry and

¹ Teresa Okure, “Contemporary Perspectives on Women in the Bible,”

<http://sedosmission.org/old/eng/okure.html> (accessed October 24, 2014).

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae munus* (postsynodal apostolic exhortation of the second African synod), 2010 no. 58; “Propositions of the Second African Synod” (available at www.vatican.va; accessed October 24, 2014).

defines the primary thrust of my investigation. This thesis focuses on women in African Christianity viewed from the perspective of my Roman Catholic tradition.

As does a bird, this thesis flies on two wings, a two-pronged argument. First, it undertakes an analysis and a critique of the understanding and construction of the concept and experience of womanhood and motherhood, along with their harmful consequences such as elevated levels of maternal mortality, as a strong influence in African culture. In this perspective, I intend to challenge the regnant conceptions and models of womanhood and motherhood to reinterpret them by means of a feminist theological analysis. As a significant outcome of this reinterpretation, I will make the case for the necessity to shift focus from biological motherhood toward the symbolic and spiritual significance of maternal identity, wisdom, leadership, and competence as the bases for envisioning an ethos of new life for women and men rooted in relationality, care for the other, and the nurturing of transformed communities in church and society.

The second “wing” of this thesis develops the argument that the prerequisite for this renewed notion of womanhood and motherhood entails the liberation of women from patriarchal domination and from an overemphasis on biological motherhood.

Taken together, both components of this thesis adduce empirical evidence, identify theological warrants, assemble personal narratives, and propose living models to highlight the spiritual, symbolic, and practical significance of women as leaders, icons, and architects of a renewed humanity restored to wholeness, dignity, and equality.

A first step in this investigation consists of a critical account of the status of women in the church in Africa through the lenses of official proclamations. Pertinent to this task is the unmasking of doctrinal and ideological constraints imposed on their participation in church leadership, decision making, and ministry. This critical analysis rests on the claim that—along with culturally generated biases and prejudices—these constraints contradict official rhetoric that celebrates the roles, qualities, gifts, and contributions of women.

However, the issues at stake are more than just definitional. Hence, further substantial matters need to be examined; these include identifying cultural biases, unconscious assumptions, and entrenched ritual traditions about women. More important, resources need to be identified for bridging this gap between rhetoric and reality.

In light of the foregoing, an important element of this thesis is an inventory of resources for examining harmful assumptions, biases, and traditions about women in view of generating new paradigms and narratives. I make the methodological presupposition that these resources have to come from women themselves. Thus, to retrieve the hidden voices of women, it will be necessary in this study to

- explore and plumb the literature generated by African women theologians across denominational affiliations and allegiances;
- present and evaluate the praxis of women on the continent whose prophetic practices serve as alternative models for envisaging the role, participation, and ministry of women in church and society; and
- examine and analyze Christian history and tradition and biblical resources for models of feminist leadership and participation as well as feminist imaging of the divine that bear direct or indirect relevance to contemporary contexts.

Against this backdrop, my thesis aims to explore the construction of women's identities and roles via the template of womanhood and motherhood in religion, theology, and culture as a valid focus of research and analysis in church and society.

Furthermore, my thesis will question the structural issues that confront women and limit their opportunities and options for human flourishing in church and society. I aim to construct a more positive tapestry of women's lives, identities, roles, and significance in religion, church, and society woven from the narrative strands of women themselves.

The encounter with these women through my analysis of literature on gender will show each woman's unique and particular story and spiritual journey. As the questions and stories about their lives deepen, some common threads of meaning will begin to emerge and form a rich and colorful beadwork of spiritual depth and creativity. Crucial to this argumentation will be issues relating to women's sexual and reproductive ethics and maternal mortality.

Maternal mortality constitutes an important hermeneutical key for understanding the concerns, objectives, and goals of this thesis. It takes seriously and is motivated by the near-total absence of a sustained theological discourse or theological research focusing on maternal mortality on a continent and in a church that supposedly prizes and values the motherhood. As I will demonstrate in this study, this lacuna is worrying at best and fatal at worst. In addition, as will become clear throughout this study, the empirical evidence and data from all the sources are shocking. To mention but one instance, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn describe the enormity and gravity of the problem in their groundbreaking work *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*:

The most common measure is the maternal mortality ratio (MMR). This refers to the number of maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births, although the data collection is usually so poor that the figures are only rough estimates. In Ireland, the safest place in the world to give birth, the MMR is just 1 per 100,000 live births. In the United States, where many more women fall through the cracks, the MMR is 11. In contrast, the average MMR in South Asia (including India and Pakistan) is 490. In sub-Saharan Africa, it is 900, and Sierra Leone has the highest MMR in the world, at 2,100.³

The authors paint a vividly wrenching portrait of the issue and add that the figures represent “The equivalent of five jumbo jets’ worth of women” who lose their lives during childbirth each day. Clearly, there is more than enough material here for a critical theological study of womanhood, maternal roles, and identities in church and society in Africa.

Set in this context, this thesis is a cry for prevention; it is a cry for the church to be awakened to a very important aspect of our human right to life in the lives of women who are less privileged in our societies. It is the cry for the inclusion of all voices with regard to race, gender, and class. It is the cry of the excluded voices especially in matters of maternal well-being, where women’s bodies have been hijacked by church men as

³ Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 98.

fodder for their doctrinal disquisitions, or, as Beattie poignantly puts it, where “our bodies are mapped by the names of our colonisers.”⁴

Furthermore, and in light of the foregoing, my quest is to understand the plight of my African sisters who are poor by asking a simple question: how are women constructed in theology, in religion, and in culture? From the locus of culture and religion, I desire to probe the experience of less-privileged women in their relationship with God as portrayed by the church and society. Through my research on maternal mortality as it affects African women, I expect to garner some clues and cues that will help arouse interest in ethical debates around this issue by approaching it from a theological standpoint and by asking the pertinent question regarding women as *imago Dei* endowed with beauty and dignity by their creator. In this way, I intend to advocate for a church that allows for the full participation and contribution of women especially when it comes to issues that pertain to their own well-being.

My hope is that the outcomes of this thesis would be helpful to those who are involved with women’s issues including policymakers, religious organizations, and the Christian community especially clerics and churchmen whose experience and perception of women and their well-being continue to be clouded by patriarchal biases.

As a celibate woman and a religious, I find it very distressing that the church’s references to women in its documents (authored by men) do not adequately express the vast spectrum of women’s experiences. The church documents are typical examples of where women are referred to only in functional and subservient roles as mothers and wives (“backbone”) without the input of women in defining themselves. An analysis of select church documents would create an entry into the means and modalities of the construction of the identity of African women.

The ultimate goal of this study is to construct narratives, generate paradigms, and open paths capable of sustaining the hopes and responding to the aspirations of African

⁴ Tina Beattie, “A Mother is Born: A Reflection in Four Parts” (paper delivered to Yale Center for Faith & Culture consultation on “Birth and Human Flourishing,” October 2015), http://faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/beattie_birth_revised.pdf (accessed September 27, 2016).

women for inclusion in ministry and leadership in the community called church in Africa and the world. Before outlining the chapters of this thesis, it would be important to mention key considerations that inform and underpin this investigation.

Terminological Considerations: Maternal Well-being, Maternal Values, Motherhood, Mothering, and Midwifing

At the onset of this study that focuses on African women and their roles and identities in church and society, it is imperative to define some key terms and clarify the sense(s) in which they are deployed in this dissertation.

In regard to the well-being of women, the vast and diverse healthcare literature provides the context for the use and adaptation of a cluster of terms found in this study. The literature lists issues such as maternal health, reproductive health, women's health, and women's well-being. Several, if not all, fall under the category of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3, which aims to "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages." SDG 3 targets three key areas: child health, maternal health, and HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. Some specific objectives of maternal health include a reduction of maternal mortality ratio and increased access to adequate antenatal care and family planning services.⁵ Adapted to the purposes of this study, these terms and concerns are important, singly and collectively. Usage, however, will be guided by the interests of this study, namely, the experiences, roles, and identities of African women in theological and cultural constructs in church and society.

Understandably, the focus of the literature on maternal health rests heavily on the biological dimension of reproductive or maternal experience. "For at least the past two decades, global women's health policy has been centered on sexual and reproductive

⁵ <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/health/> (accessed June 30, 2017).

health. UN agencies, governments and nongovernmental organizations have been focused on reducing maternal mortality and morbidity – and their efforts have been effective. Significant gains have been made in saving the lives of women and children.”⁶

While acknowledging the importance of focusing on sexual and reproductive health as significant issues in the debate about women’s health and women’s well-being, this study intentionally attempts to venture beyond biological accounts of women’s maternal experience or health. As such, this study retrieves and adopts terms like *maternal well-being* and *maternal values* heuristically to explore the experiences of poor African women, without limiting such experiences to their biological sense, in view of gaining new insights on women’s roles and identities. In other words, in this study, maternal well-being as a dimension of women’s experience constitutes the locus, as well as represents an attempt, to critically consider the situations and conditions of women – using the particular case of poor African women – in order to advocate for their dignity as *imago Dei* and to generate specific theological insights. One such insight is characterized in this study as *maternal leadership*, understood as the exercise of a variety of qualities and values founded on the experiences and practices of women that strive to promote and achieve greater human flourishing in church and society.

The advantages of this approach of adopting and adapting the concepts of maternal well-being and maternal values for this study are multiple. First, this approach allows us to examine a variety of important factors that affect negatively the lives of poor African women. Among these, as mentioned in the preceding section, this study pays particular attention to *maternal mortality* and draws on the inspiring insight of Tina

⁶ Robyn Norton, “Women’s Health: A New Global Agenda,” *Women’s Health* June 1, 2016: 271–273 at 272.

Beattie to explore its relevance for theological discourse. Second, it allows us to highlight and underline the gifts that women bring as women to church and society. Third, it is useful for envisaging creative and life-giving qualities that women themselves cultivate and sustain for the benefit of human flourishing, even in circumstances that depreciate their integrity and dignity as women.

In exploring maternal well-being and values in relation to women's roles and identities, the study extends the comprehension to *motherhood*, not as an institution tightly confined within a biological context, but understood primarily as a quality of being that allows both women and men to embrace as gift, the nurturing, protection, and sustenance of life in its totality. As it will become clear in the course of this study, and drawing extensively on the insights of Ghanaian theologian and scholar of African Christianity Mercy Amba Oduyoye, understood in a non-biological sense, maternal values and motherhood represent a gift to humanity. When recognized, respected, and valued they empower both women and men to create and sustain conditions that promote human flourishing without discrimination.

In the perspective of this study, the following are useful indicators or parameters for understanding the way maternal well-being, maternal values, and motherhood are deployed throughout this study in a non-biological sense.

First, to repeat a point already mentioned, it is of the nature of a gift, the exercise of which is oriented toward the flourishing of the other, however this "other" is defined. In a related manner, Pope Francis argues in his post-synodal exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*,

that love promotes freedom, “gives life,” and “opens our eyes and enables us to see, beyond all else, the great worth of human beings.”⁷

Second, without denigrating their specific and technical use in the field of healthcare and women’s well-being, the use of this cluster of terms serves a theological purpose. A key argument of this study could be formulated in the following terms: to the extent that women are deprived of opportunities and conditions to exercise and manifest their gifts and qualities, such deprivation constitutes an unacceptable assault on their dignity and integrity as people created in the image and likeness of God. As Beattie points out, the prevalence of maternal mortality is a vivid and painful example of the negation of the dignity, integrity, and well-being of women; and, it is also a valid matter for theological discourse.

Third, related to the previous point, the quality of inclusiveness of this gift – characterized in many instances in this study as the gift of *womanhood* – defies any attempt to confine it to a purely biological realm. Properly conceived, and as used in this study, this gift is expansive in scope; it models for both women and men in church and society the shared responsibility of care for human flourishing. In this sense, while I concur with Pope Francis that “masculinity and femininity are not rigid categories” and his opposition to any “rigid approach” that “turns into an over-accentuation of the masculine or feminine,”⁸ this study maintains strongly that *this gift comes from women*: it is a gift from women and by women for the rest of humanity. Besides, as *gift*, *value*, and

⁷ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), March 19, 2016, no. 166; nos. 127-128. See Gerald O’Collins, “The Joy of Love (*Amoris Laetitia*): The Papal Exhortation in Its Context,” *Theological Studies* Vol 77, Issue no. 4 (December 2016): 905-921 at 915-916.

⁸ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 286; see also, O’Collins, “The Joy of Love,” 913.

quality it is *maternal* to the extent that it is oriented toward giving, affirming, promoting, advancing, protecting, and sustaining the totality of life and human flourishing for all, but not in any narrowly ideological and reductively biological sense.

If concrete examples are needed, and as will become clear further on, one African theologian who incarnates this idea of non-biological maternal values and motherhood, both in her pioneering commitment to transformative theological research and scholarship and contribution to the flourishing of human life in the church and in the world, is Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Her figure and personality loom large in the landscape of theological discourse on the status of women in Africa. According to Letty M. Russell, “Mercy Amba ... represents for so many of us what it means to be a wise woman who comes bearing gifts....”⁹ She continues:

This wise woman also was full of courage as she moved forward in her developing role as the mother of African women’s theology. She actually used the word *feminism* in her book and talked about the gifts that African women share with men as human beings created in the image of God.... She lifted up the lives and struggles of African women who are always there serving the patriarchal line, and yet usually missing as partners in the leadership and teaching of the churches.¹⁰

As evident in this study, I rely extensively on the example, narrative, and scholarship of Oduyoye to develop the ideas of maternal well-being and non-biological maternal values and motherhood.

In this study, the emphasis on the idea of non-biological motherhood constitutes a direct anti-thesis to social and cultural norms and constructs that tend to value women

⁹ Letty M. Russell, “Mercy Amba Oduyoye: Wise Woman Bearing Gifts,” in *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devakarsham Betty Govinden and Sorojini Nadar (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2002), 260.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 250-251.

exclusively and solely for their biological capacity and actual ability to reproduce. As demonstrated in this study, in cultures and customs of many African countries, like Nigeria, “Reproduction is so important that many consider it the primary function of marriage.... A married couple without children will pursue all legitimate means to get a child, especially through religious and medical agencies.”¹¹ As this study argues, not only does this approach seem reductionist, it also risks becoming oppressive to women. There are women who by choice or by circumstance do not fulfil the biological function prescribed by this cultural and social construct. They do not as a result lose the gift of their *womanhood* or their dignity as *imago Dei*. It is in part in this context that this study explores the idea of non-biological motherhood and maternal values as offering redemptive possibilities for women and men. The biological experience does not exhaust the capacities and opportunities that women have to experience human flourishing and to facilitate same for other women and men in church and society.

A caveat is in order in light of the foregoing considerations. In this study, it is important not to confuse or conflate non-biological maternal experience or motherhood with the totality of women’s experience. That would mean falling into the essentialist trap. One of the central pillars of this thesis is that women’s experience defines a much wider and a more richly textured domain both experientially and in scholarly discourse, albeit a combination of social and cultural attitudes routinely reduces this experience to one dimension. In the understanding advanced in this study, the idea of non-biological maternal experience or motherhood represents a clearly defined *space* within a larger

¹¹ Toyin Falola, *Culture and Customs of Nigeria* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 2001), 119; cf. Magesa, *What is Not Sacred?*, 73; Lloyd Fanusie, “Sexuality and Women in African Culture,” Oduyoye and Kanyoro, *The Will to Arise*, 141-142.

experience that is accessible to women, but not in any essentialist, reductionist, simplistic or generalizing manner. Understandably, while some women possibly will recognize themselves in this particular space, others will not, even contesting some of the claims put forward in this study. In the contested domain of gender studies and feminist theological discourse an idea such as this skirts the borders of controversy, essentialism, and romanticism. Careful watch is needed to avoid these pitfalls.

It is important to reiterate the fact that this study focuses on poor African women. Considering their experiences, conditions, and situations (such as maternal mortality, sexual gender-based violence, culturally sanctioned discrimination, discrimination within religious communities, etc.), it critiques the structures and factors that create, sustain, and foist these conditions on women and, more importantly, retrieves the inspirational qualities and gifts of these women undimmed by the weight of their painful conditions and circumstances.

To return to the question of *motherhood* and its use in and relevance for this study, the present purposes clearly distinguish between a patently reductionist and patriarchal conception that sees motherhood as the sole, defining characteristic of women's experience in a biological terms, on the one hand, and a liberating understanding of it as a gift that women can offer for human flourishing. In the former sense motherhood is constrained by and confined to a biological and reductionist straightjacket and regulated as a cultural, social, and political institution; whereas, in the latter sense, it manifests as a dynamic process for recognizing, appreciating, and appropriating the gift of women's experience, as well as for rethinking the genuine reciprocity, mutuality, and equality that ought to characterize the relationship between

women and men in church and society. It is in this latter sense that I introduce and use “*mothering*” to retrieve, accentuate, and describe the gift of women’s experience in concrete situations that go beyond reproductive activities. As I point out in chapter 3, there is a tangible and inspiring mothering quality to the narratives and experiences of the women who are profiled as mothers of a new society, birthing a renewed future for the world, from their immediate environment and varied contexts.

An associated term that captures the dynamics of mothering as is evident in the narratives of these women is “*midwife*.” In using this term the aim is to describe their singular ability to creatively reimagine and labor assiduously for the advent of an alternative society devoid of the ills that oppress women, men, and children, particularly in situations of crisis, conflict, and violence.

Emmanuel Katongole gives voice to this idea of midwife, understood theologically, when he writes about Angelina Atyam’s unique role as a “midwife to a new future” that “stretches beyond northern Uganda”: “Angelina similarly serves as a midwife for a new family birthed through forgiveness, offering peace and forgiveness as gifts that have to be massaged into birth, be tenderly received, and nurtured to life.... Thus in Angelina’s story one is able to catch a glimpse of a new future.”¹² This is mothering (and motherhood) defined and illustrated, not as mere metaphor, but as a creative and constructive path for women and men, unimpeded by stumbling blocks imposed by ideological and patriarchal conceptions that reduce and limit motherhood to a purely biological status.

¹² Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 161.

Without a doubt, the totality of this study consists of a gendered approach to theological analysis of cultural, social, and religious influences, including stereotypes and biases, based on sex, but which does not overlook, ignore, or undermine the critical importance of sex as a marker of biological differences. Properly conceived, the aim is to name unjust gender disparities as an important step toward a commitment to the flourishing of women and men, in a theological and scholarly enterprise that a one-sided intellection – in church and society – has tended to obfuscate.

To sum up, in light of the foregoing, this study references *non-biological motherhood* and *maternal values* as a gift founded on *women's experience* that invites and enables all to assume *mothering* responsibility consisting of actions that *midwife* a future of equality, dignity, and justice for all women, men, and children.

Theological Considerations

African women are not oblivious to the reality detailed above. Okure has remarked,

The marginalization of religious and women in general, or giving them token acknowledgement here and there, is simply a sin, if our equality and oneness in Christ through baptism is anything to go by ... The practice distorts the image of God in woman, denies woman her baptismal right and status in Christ, and greatly impoverishes not only the woman but the entire human community by belittling, killing and suppressing the God-given talents of women.¹³

Her view constitutes a telling indictment of Christianity.

Christianity came to Africa wearing a distinctly Western garb. The expression of the Christian God was foreign to the African worldview even though Christianity is a religion that has traveled many countries across several generations and has been adopted and adapted into many cultures. As Jehu Hanciles observes,

¹³ “Synod for Africa opens to high hopes, but realism,” *The National Catholic Reporter* (October 2, 2009), <http://ncronline.org/print/15163> (accessed October 26, 2016).

The migrant movement that spearheaded the Gentile mission took Christianity into a new cultural universe, quite distinct from the Jewish world in which the faith was born. Within a matter of decades, Gentile believers far outnumbered Jewish Christians and Christianity was transformed into a Gentile faith—Jesus the Messiah and Savior of Israel became Jesus the Lord.¹⁴

The historical context for this groundbreaking movement may seem remote from the standpoint of contemporary Christians. Yet one obvious implication here is that Christianity needs to be transformed repeatedly in our day to include the worldviews of those outside the West and those of women, especially in African church and society.

In our times, we are experiencing a shift in the cultural patterns of belief that have previously held sway in the colonized areas of the world. John Allen and others like him allude to the astonishment of a previously westernized Church that now finds “two thirds of its members living in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.”¹⁵ Jesus Christ is now present in Africa, and he is being named and recognized as African. The church in Africa is growing and shaping its own identity in the Christian world. There is a strong and definitive movement toward an African christological understanding of Jesus Christ. Diane Stinton’s groundbreaking work on African Christology documents several interesting innovative examples of this movement,¹⁶ from which women are not absent. Critical to addressing some of the questions posed in this study is the resolution of another: who is Christ for African women?

Historical and Cultural Considerations

In Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*, the heroic figure, Okonkwo, after having been exiled from his fatherland, moved his family to his motherland. His maternal uncle’s welcome reads as a poignant testimony to the untapped potential of African

¹⁴ Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 155.

¹⁵ John L. Allen, *The Future Church: How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 2.

¹⁶ Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).

women that lies buried under the detritus of patriarchy and androcentrism:

Why is Okonkwo with us today? This is not his clan. We are only his mother's kinsmen. He does not belong here. He is an exile, condemned to live in a strange land ... It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you.¹⁷

In culture as in religion, the roles, dignity, and identities of women have suffered neglect and contempt. Oduyoye links this development to the history of Christianity in Africa. She argues that many of churches in Africa have—perhaps unwittingly—aided in the loss of African women's identity via the absorption of Western culture.¹⁸ Thus, a study of the roles and identities of African women necessarily implicates the history of Christianity especially because of how women have experienced oppression and subjugation in the (Western) patriarchal church system and in colonization. African women's relationship with their culture—their families, cultural rituals, songs, dances, stories, proverbs, clothing, and last but not least their religious beliefs and practices—provide a rich terrain of study for those who desire to find the treasure in the field.

As mentioned, the primary identity of many women in Africa is as wife and mother. Oduyoye notes that the way that African Christian women are identified is closely aligned with the portrait of the ideal wife in Proverbs 31:10–31. The roles of womanhood and motherhood are intertwined. The dominant interpretation, especially in official church documents, would tend to portray these roles of African women as positive, such as providing support and creating the space for others to grow and bringing the nurturing face of Eve into the family. As persons, they are life giving, generous, and caring; this is in contrast to Eve perceived as the origin of sin.¹⁹ However, the church's precipitation to appreciate the role of women as bearers (“backbone”) of the burdens of

¹⁷ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 133–34.

¹⁸ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Acting as Women,” in *African Theology Today*, ed.

Emmanuel Katongole (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2002), 179.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 182–83.

humanity, procreators, and helpmates using flowery rhetoric often bypasses the positive appreciation of the personhood of African women in themselves. This study attempts to retrieve this personhood from under the weight of such perceptions as biological motherhood.

Identifying women as mothers with the sole biological function of reproducing is a societal construction of gender that dehumanizes the very nature of women. Women in African society are recognized insofar as they can reproduce/regenerate in the biological sense. They are expected to bear children who will carry on the family name. A barren woman is treated as an outcast lacking respect in African society. Many African women have been socialized into thinking of themselves as worthless if they cannot bear children. Hence, many strive to carve out a maternal identity by biological means: “Motherhood is envisaged as a source of joy and fulfillment to women.”²⁰ Neither church nor society has celebrated this as they should because some if not most of the myths and rituals in African cultures around motherhood are in reality degrading and oppressive to women.²¹

Yet there are resources that valorize the role and place of women in Africa. An Eritrean proverb says, “A home without a mother is a desert.” Many hidden messages in African cultures acknowledge African women as the foundation of the African family, but does their identity end there? In some places in Africa, women are treated like slaves and deprived of the human rights that are the heritage of every human being. “This is an affront to not only their dignity but also the best offerings of African tradition, which sees women as the preeminent symbol of life, a precious gift.”²² Issues such as these form some of the considerations at the core of this thesis.

²⁰ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *Africa Woman Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 79.

²¹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 201, 59–60.

²² Anne Arabome, “‘Woman, You are Set Free!’ Women and Discipleship in the Church,” in *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: The Second African Synod*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 121.

Ecclesiological and Ethical Considerations: Looking beneath and beyond the Texts

The Roman Catholic tradition has generated a plethora of documents addressing issues concerning women. Unfortunately, many of the texts that speak for both men and women address the subject of “man” which is of course assumed to include all women. Using the medium of an exclusive language, most of the official church texts conceals the reality of the oppressive conditions African women live under.

Pope John XXIII in his acclaimed document *Pacem in terris* (On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity and Liberty, 1963), set the tone for the appreciation of the dignity and the respect of the human person as the cornerstone of Catholic social doctrine. This document affirms the sacredness of the human person “endowed with intelligence and free will” and affirms basic human rights for both men and women.²³ The encyclical also recognized that women played significant roles in public life:

Women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity. Far from being content with a purely passive role or allowing themselves to be regarded as a kind of instrument, they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons.²⁴

Similarly, Paul VI, in *Populorum progressio* (On the Development of Peoples, 1967), stated,

In God’s plan, every man is born to seek self-fulfillment, for every human life is called to some task by God ... Endowed with intellect and free will, each man is responsible for his self-fulfillment even as he is for his

²³ Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in terris* (On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity and Liberty),
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html (accessed October 26, 2014).

²⁴ Ibid.

salvation.²⁵

Though not evident in the use of exclusive language, this statement applies to women as well. This idea of the inalienable right to seek self-fulfillment was already conceded by Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 1965), which underlined the imperative of creating an environment conducive to the recognition and affirmation of "the dignity of the human person without any discrimination of race, sex, religion or social condition."²⁶

Several other official church documents focus the concern about human dignity and on the situation of women. *Humanae vitae* (On Human Life, 1968) takes note of "a new understanding of the dignity of woman and her place in society"²⁷ In his apostolic letter *Octogesima adveniens* (On the Occasion of the Eightieth Anniversary of the Encyclical *Rerum novarum*, 1971), Pope Paul VI was more emphatic.

We do not have in mind that false equality which would deny the distinction with woman's proper role, which is of such capital importance, at the heart of the family as well as within society. Developments in legislation should on the contrary be directed to protecting her proper vocation and at the same time recognizing her independence as a person, and her equal rights to participate in cultural, economic, social and political life.²⁸

²⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* (On the Development of Peoples),
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html (accessed October 26, 2014).

²⁶ Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World),
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed October 26, 2014).

²⁷ Pope Paul VI, *Humanae vitae* (On Human Life),
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html (accessed October 28, 2014).

²⁸ Pope Paul VI, *Octogesima adveniens* ("On the Occasion of the Eightieth Anniversary of the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*"),

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this quote is tucked under no. 13, which is subtitled “Youth” almost as though the author of this document could not quite locate a more suitable place for “women”—another clear example of how and where the hierarchy *places* women in the church.

Other examples of ecclesiastical rhetoric exist. The synodal document *Justitia in mundo* (Justice in the World, 1971), made a plea “that women should have their own share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and likewise of the Church.”²⁹ Similarly and previously, the document *Mater et magistra* (On Christianity and Social Progress, 1961), underlined society’s “duty to protect the rights of all its people, and particularly of its weaker members, the workers, women and children.”³⁰

Two things stand out from the foregoing inventory of official ecclesiastical documents suffused with rhetoric of dignity and rights: first, the condescending and patronizing manner in which official hierarchy deals with the issue of women’s roles and identities; second, the gap between rhetoric and practice on matters affecting the dignity and rights of women in the church. Both concerns bear serious scrutiny. This study will attempt to develop ways to bridge this gap.

Methodological Considerations

As mentioned, in this thesis, I intend to make use of narratives as the principal methodological tool. Considered as such, narrative methodology is itself rooted in the anthropological model. The primary appeal of this model is that it gives priority to the human person, that is his or her voice, experience, context, and worldview. Besides,

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens_en.html (accessed October 28, 2014).

²⁹ World Synod of Bishops, *Justitia in Mundo* (Justice in the World), http://catholicsocialservices.org.au/Catholic_Social_Teaching/Justitia_in_Mundo (accessed October 28, 2014).

³⁰ *Mater et magistra* (On Christianity and Social Progress), http://Www.Vatican.Va/Holy_Father/John_Xxiii/Encyclicals/Documents/Hf_J-Xxiii_Enc_15051961_Mater_En.Html (accessed October 28, 2014).

narrative is a uniquely empirical process. It can hardly be done “from a distance.” It requires not just observation but encounter and relationality. Through this narrative approach, I will be granted privileged access to the experience, context, and worldview of African women as these exist in multiple sources and voices. Moreover, I anticipate that through this encounter, their voices will emerge and speak to the issues under consideration in this study. Thus, narrative stands on an anthropological and empirical foundation.

As described by Stephen Bevans in *Models of Contextual Theology*, the anthropological model considers human culture and the accompanying narrative to be a sacred process: “The human context is good, holy, and valuable.”³¹ Such a model allows us to “*know the culture to pull the gospel out of it.*”³² This model seems quite appropriate for this research because at its core, according to Bevans, it

centers on the value and goodness of *anthropos*, the human person. Human experience, as it is limited and yet realized in culture, social change, and geographical and historical circumstances, is considered the basic criterion of judgment as to whether a particular contextual expression is genuine or not.³³

Furthermore, this model emphasizes the particularity that comes with the individual’s experience. Based on this understanding, my research methodology entails waiting, watching, and paying attention while resisting the lure of facile judgment of what I am seeing or hearing. Just as Moses’ encounter with God in the burning bush caused him to take off his shoes in the presence of the holy, so this attitude informs my research methodology—being present to the holy in African women in my research and attending to their voices, experiences, and contexts with reverence. Perhaps, indeed, new meanings may surface that I never expected—surprising, insightful, and enriching!

As Nigerian theologian Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator asserts, theological research does not float above culture and context. Doing theology is not an exercise

³¹ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 56.

³² *Ibid.*, 55.

³³ *Ibid.*

in conceptual weightlessness. It develops within the particular culture and context of the community that attempts to utter a word or two on the reality of God and the demands of faith for daily living. This word does not defy the law of gravity.³⁴

Hence, it is of primary importance in this study to pay attention to real lives, personal accounts, and lived experiences that constitute and shape the narratives of African women who will be encountered in the pages of this thesis.

As mentioned, the anthropological model that underpins the narrative methodology holds the possibility of transforming the quest and the research on account of expected new learnings. “Both researcher and researched are changed, and as a result, the gospel message takes on a shape and content that it never had before.”³⁵ In addition, in this approach that relies on the anthropological model, the researcher is a catalyst.³⁶ This catalyst is in the end akin to the nurturer of a new birth, and important metaphor for understanding the roles and identities of women in nonbiological ways. In this regard, Bevans counsels “a serious attempt to show that constructing a contextual theology starts not with a predetermined message or content, but with God’s living, challenging, life-giving presence in the midst of human life.”³⁷ This is an important dimension of my method as I engage in this research.

Besides the fact that my theological method speaks out of the concrete realities of women’s lives that I encounter, scripture and tradition will play a significant role when I encounter a person or a group. But so will experience. These three “legs” are symbolic of many things. For the purposes of this thesis, I think that the symbolism of three legs is best expressed by Orobator when he identifies the three ingredients of theological reflection: “*experience* ... the *tradition* of the community called church, where we do theology, and the *Bible*, the Christian book of faith.”³⁸ These three legs are important to

³⁴ Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 152.

³⁵ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 66.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 69.

³⁸ Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 10.

how I carry out the research. Experience is important—mine and that of the people with whom I am researching. Equally important are the traditions of the church, which affect the ecclesial experience and shape how roles and identities are constructed in the Christian community; and the scripture whose contents and “teachings” are routinely adduced to provide warrants and rationales for roles and identities assigned to men and women in the Christian community.

We can further reflect on the symbolism of the three legs from the perspective of constructing local theologies developed by Robert Schreiter. He outlines a variant but overlapping set of constituent elements: “The three principal roots beneath the growth of local theology are gospel, church, and culture.”³⁹ In this context, “gospel” refers to the good news of Jesus Christ, which forms the foundation of the worshiping community. This gospel is proclaimed in a real setting that is

a complex of those cultural patterns in which the gospel has taken on flesh, at once enmeshed in the local situation, extending through communities in our own time and in the past and reaching out to the eschatological realization of the fullness of God’s reign.⁴⁰

These communities constitute the reality called church.

Finally, culture plays a vital role for “it represents a way of life for a given time and place, replete with values, symbols, and meanings, reaching out with hopes and dreams, often struggling for a better world.”⁴¹ These three—gospel, church, and culture—form the three legs of the larger pot in the local context where experience, tradition, and scripture also come into play.

To reiterate this important consideration, in this methodology I have adopted for this study, narrative holds pride of place. For many Africans, the story or narrative is both a *means* and a *source* of reflection. As Oduyoye argues and I concur, this is particularly true of African women:

³⁹ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 20–21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

The normative role of stories in Africa's oral corpus, and the role of story in biblical theology, give women the paradigm for their theological reflection. Story was a traditional source of theology ... The approach to theology, that has characterized women, is to tell a story and then to reflect upon it.⁴²

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that as an African woman, I will rely extensively on this methodological tool to achieve the purposes of this thesis.

As an African woman, I feel most drawn to the use of the narrative style. Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz (quoting Tissa Balasuriya) state, "A specific event/experience can be a micro human experience that embodies a universal value. By deepening the analysis of a particular context we can arrive at more universal perspectives."⁴³ Also quoting David Tracy, they call this process "a journey of intensification into particularity in all its finitude and all its striving for the infinite in this particular history in all its effects, personal and cultural."⁴⁴ Narratives give voice to something deeper and wider than the specific or particular event or experience. Thus, in this thesis, not only will we hear the voices of African women—of their experiences and contexts—but also the wider implications and lessons they voice for humanity in church and society.

Furthermore, I consider narratives to be more performative; they often serve as stronger catalysts or incentives to action. As Kristof and WuDunn incisively observe, "A growing collection of psychological studies show that statistics have a dulling effect, while it is individual stories that move people to act."⁴⁵

Kristof and WuDunn's observation indicates a key component of narrative as a methodology, namely, the power of storytelling as a way of giving voice to the lived realities of people who would otherwise not be accorded a voice in academic discourses.

⁴² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology: Introductions in Feminist Theology* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 11.

⁴³ Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 49.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, 99.

As such, this methodology is related, first, to how they (in the context of this study, African women) imbue their experience with meaning and, second, how the process of making sense of their experience generates insights for constructing a new and liberating identity. As a theological discourse, I make an effort in this study not to engage in an exercise that would be purely speculative and disincarnate. According to Orobator, such an approach would amount to a negation of the demands of contextual methodologies.⁴⁶ He illustrates this point by considering the “challenge of HIV/AIDS for the Christian community” and points out that “A theological reflection that seeks to address this issue stands to gain much by actual engagement with the lives and situations of people infected and affected by AIDS. Only by doing this will the outcome of such theological reflection be relevant to their conditions.”⁴⁷ The narrative methodology allows us to engage with the lives and situations of people. In this study, this goal is achieved notably via the accounts presented in chapter 2 and chapter 3, even if several are derived from secondary sources. The important thing is to keep theological discourse anchored in lived reality.

Furthermore, this study makes a case for a theological discourse in Africa that is not held captive by a systematic articulation of Christian belief couched in abstract concepts. This concern reveals another dimension of the narrative methodology. Most, but not all, of the cultures of Africa prioritize orality and the spoken word – broadly categorized as “stories” – over the written word. Narrative methodology represents an attempt to capture and honor this dimension, without ignoring real problems associated with this methodology, as I will indicate below. One could argue that, perhaps, it is a false dilemma to pit concepts against stories in communicating or imparting a religious message. Yet, concepts do not exhaust the realm of meaning when it comes to dealing with the concrete experiences of people. The narrative form or storytelling retains an important methodological relevance for generating insights aimed at transforming and empowering both the narrator and the hearer.

On the importance of paying attention to oral and symbolic sources for theological reflection, veteran Kenyan church leader Henry Okullu notes:

⁴⁶ Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, “Contextual Theological Methodologies” in *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, ed. Diane B. Stinton (London: SPCK, 2010), 3-11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

When we are looking for African theology we should go first to the fields, to the village church, to Christian homes to listen to those spontaneously uttered prayers before people go to bed.... We must listen to the throbbing drumbeats and the clapping of hands accompanying the impromptu singing in the independent churches. We must look at the way in which Christianity is being planted in Africa through music, drama, songs, dances, art, paintings....⁴⁸

Okullu's reference to listening as an important component of narrative methodology has been further explored by Nigerian theologian Elochukwu Uzukwu in the context of leadership in the Christian community. For him, leadership thrives on listening; it "pays close attention to the conversations at all levels of the People of God, [which] may lead to stronger leadership roles for women within the African church, upset human/cultural forecasts, and rejuvenate the church-community."⁴⁹ As mentioned, the methodology adopted for this study underlines the importance of listening and paying attention to experience and practice in order to witness to the emergence of new insight.

Furthermore, in this methodology, context matters as the locus wherein the experience of the women referenced in this study unfolds. In the broader framework, contextualization forms part of the larger project of African theology that responds to the demands, challenges, and promises of faith lived in the community, a challenge that Paul VI addressed to the church in Africa almost five decades ago when he declared: "You may, and you must, have an African Christianity."⁵⁰

Far from constituting a monologue, narrative is grounded in dialogue and conversation, encounter, and engagement. Consequently, in this study, I will engage with

⁴⁸ Quoted in Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 17. In a similar way, Paul Gifford highlights the importance of this methodology in his study of African Christianity: "We cannot presume that it [theology] is so central to African religion, even Africa's mainline Christianity. Some of the churches we will be studying place nearly all their emphasis on experience, on ecstatic worship, visions, healing, dreams and joyous bodily movement; their members would perhaps not claim to have any 'theology'. Most will not have any written theology. It is through their songs and prayers, sermons and testimonies that we will get to their symbolic cosmos; it is these we will draw on to establish their 'belief' or 'theology'." *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 26-27.

⁴⁹ Elochukwu Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness: Appropriating Faith in West African Style* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 140; *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1996).

⁵⁰ Paul VI, "The African Church Today," *The Pope Speaks* 14, no. 3 (1969): 214-220.

the stories gathered from African women and with the reflections of scholars of theology, religion, and culture to help shed light on this process and its meaning.

To summarize the foregoing methodological considerations, this study focuses on the human person and considers him or her as a bearer of an inalienable dignity. It is within this theological and anthropological worldview or space that I situate the African women whose narratives form the basis of this study. I adopt the anthropological model of Bevans according to which human culture and narrative consist of a sacred process that embodies that which is “good, holy, and valuable.”⁵¹ My preference for this model stems primarily from its recognition and prioritization of the goodness of the human person as well as the critical importance of honoring the particularity that comes with the individual’s experience.⁵² In this study, I will give priority to the lives, experiences, and contexts of African women in a way that I believe will honor and recognize the abundance of unique and irreplaceable gifts they bring to church and society.

Another integral dimension of the anthropological methodology, as in practical theology, is the interdisciplinary approach. Thus, this study aims to engage with the reflections of scholars of African religion, culture, and society. Accordingly, this study will draw on resources from other disciplines, including sociology, African literature, psychology, and comparative religion.

These scholars include Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Teresa Okure, Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, Laurenti Magesa, Teresia Hinga, Tina Beattie, Joseph Healey, Musimbi R. Kanyoro, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Emmanuel Katongole, Elizabeth Johnson, Anne Nasimiyu, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Shawn Copeland, Musa Dube, and Gerrie Ter Haar. In addition, this study will engage in conversations with African historians of Christianity and religions including John Mbiti, Toyin Falola, and Jacop Olupona.

Whether taken together or treated separately, religion, culture, and gender lend themselves to interdisciplinary investigation. Hence, as mentioned above, this study will draw on resources from other disciplines including sociology, anthropology, psychology, and comparative religion and select works of some scholars who represent these

⁵¹ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 56.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 55.

disciplines, as interlocutors, including Sara Ruddick, Obioma Nnaemeka, Ify Amadiume, Felicitas Goodman, and Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn.

Among these interlocutors, Sara Ruddick stands out. From the perspective of methodology, Ruddick's insightful and controversial notion of "maternal thinking" will feature prominently in developing the key arguments of this thesis. Considering the importance that her work assumes in this study, a critical note of caution is in order, as there are many criticisms of Ruddick's approach which are relevant to this thesis and need to be taken into account.

In the first place, in opting to draw heavily on Ruddick to make my argument, I expose myself inadvertently to criticisms levelled against "her middleclass, American, urban, liberal, secular, and white version of the practices of motherhood...."⁵³ I perceive faint echoes here of Gifford's critique of Africa's theological agenda as elitist, westernized, and detached from real life situations, as mentioned below.

More seriously, Ruddick has been criticized for equating mothering with a set of practices contained in universally applicable activities and for what would seem an uncritical theoretical and epistemological jump that identifies these practices as prerequisites or a propaedeutic for the practice of peace-making. Further, Ruddick has been explicitly criticized for harboring an ethnocentrism and a universalizing tendency that seemingly ignored the situated 'thinking' arising out of located social practices that develop in relation to classed experiences, the experiences of maternal and child disability, and histories of enslavement, colonization and racism.⁵⁴

Although relying on the refreshing and ground-breaking insights of Ruddick, this study does not attempt to make an apology for her. But the twin charge of ethnocentrism

⁵³ Ranjana Khanna, "Reflections on Sara Ruddick's Maternal Thinking," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 37: 3 & 4 (Fall/Winter 2009): 302-304 at 302.

⁵⁴ Lisa Baraitser, "Sara Ruddick, 1935-2011: A Mother's Thought," *Radical Philosophy*, 60-61. A strong proponent of this charge of ethnocentrism is Patrice DiQuinzio, "Exclusion and essentialism in feminist theory: The problem of mothering," *Hypatia* Vol. 8, No. 3 (August 1993): 1-20. For an incisive summary of the main critiques and criticisms of Ruddick, see Jean Keller, "Rethinking Ruddick and the Ethnocentrism Critique of 'Maternal Thinking'," *Hypatia* Vol. 25, No. 4 (Fall 2010): 834-851.

and universalism could be mitigated in two ways by the methodological approach adopted in this study.

First, regarding the criticism of ethnocentrism, this study will draw extensively on narratives of several African women in the local context of their particular and concrete experiences and practices as women. So doing, I concede the situated-*ness* of their experiences and the contingency of their practices. Accordingly, this study illustrates and recognizes the diversity or variety that should moderate any rigidly normative account based on culturally, linguistically, and geographically limited scholarly worldviews or frameworks. This study does not shy away from naming cultural biases that militate against experience and practice in relation to how women's roles and identities are perceived, constructed, and controlled in church and society in Africa.

Thus, secondly, to a large extent this study relativizes covert or overt universalizing tendencies by referencing the incontrovertible reality of women's experiences and their stories – in present instance, from a non-western, non-middleclass standpoint. Put more vividly, poverty has a name, so does maternal mortality and sexual gender-based violence; so, too, do the struggle for peace, the practice of forgiveness, and the commitment to reconciliation, justice, and peace – all of which are evident in the narratives of several African women presented in this study.

The methodological approach indicated will emerge concretely in the subsequent chapters of this study.

Limitations and Lessons: Between Narrative Methodology and Practical Theology

Bevans identifies as “a major danger” of the anthropological model the temptation to indulge in “cultural romanticism.” The manifestation of this danger is twofold: a “lack of critical thinking about the particular culture in question” and the illusion of an idyllic culture that “does not really exist.”⁵⁵ In the case of African theology, this danger of romanticizing or idealizing – as well as reifying and essentializing – “African culture” is real and present. As Paul Gifford warns in his incisive study of the impact of modernity on African Christianity, “this determination to celebrate African culture can lead to some

⁵⁵ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 60.

very idealized presentations.”⁵⁶ Besides, Africa is neither a monolithic narrative nor a homogenous entity. Diversity characterizes the continent’s histories, cultures, peoples, and languages. Instructively, three decades ago, Congolese philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe argued that “Africa” was and is first and foremost an invention, essentially the product of false and contrived constructs attributable to Western scholarship.⁵⁷ His is an extreme representation. It would suffice to note that Africa is not one thing. Nor is it a paragon of cultural perfection.

The limitation identified by Bevans as “a major danger” has an important implication for this study. It concerns the fact that the picture that results from the anthropological model on which this study bases its methodology cannot circumvent the reality of sin and brokenness. In fact, the narratives, accounts, and stories presented and analyzed in this study have as their point of departure (and context) the brokenness of people’s lives, especially poor African women. Whatever is referenced as African culture hardly equates an idyllic reality. The lives of many African women as we shall see in chapter 2, chapter 3, and chapter 4 speak of pain, abuse, oppression, and marginalization. Highlighting and paying attention to this context, that is, telling their stories, opens up the possibility of healing and grace. The challenge is to understand healing as a grace to be achieved rather than assumed as a given in the varied contexts of Africa. It is important to stress that the methodology adopted in this study – or any other methodology for that matter – cannot whitewash the reality of sin and brokenness and still pretend to be a credible and authentic narrative.

Related to the preceding paragraph, I note that Healey and Sybertz locate the point of departure of narrative theology in “African culture, but specifically African oral literature and the wider range of narrative and oral forms.” They quote Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike: “The oral literature of the African people is their [Africans] unwritten Bible.”⁵⁸ A drawback of this approach that presents “African culture” in a generalizing and essentialist manner is already evident in the preceding two paragraphs. Whatever is

⁵⁶ Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), 127.

⁵⁷ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

⁵⁸ Healey and Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, 28.

referenced as culture, it is important to critically assess it for traces or instances of life-affirming *and* life-denying assumptions and practices before being made the basis of claims or conclusions about lives and experiences of African women.

There is yet another limitation. Narratives can be extremely malleable both from the perspective of memory and history and that of the context of the narrator. In other words, what is remembered, how it is remembered, and to what purposes may vary from one narrator to another and from one context to the other. The accounts and stories that this study depends on are mostly secondary in nature in terms of sources. This should necessarily restrain the scope or extent of the claims and conclusions to be made in this study. As will be pointed out in the final chapter, while these accounts are limited to the experiences of the people who generate them, they do not limit the larger reality of the action and grace of the divine, which, according to Elizabeth Johnson and Jean-Luc Marion, always exceeds our capacity to name and image the divine.

Connected to the preceding point is the fact that it is nearly impossible to design and prescribe standard rules for the conduct of the narrative methodology. At first sight, the accounts and stories that I have gathered from various sources in chapter 2 and chapter 3 would appear to be disparate. Discerning their meaning represents a level of analysis that is one step removed both from the women's narrative and the sense and meaning that they make of it – what could also be termed “insights.” The result is that as a researcher I would often find myself in a somewhat methodological no-man's land, with the only recourse I have being a sort of – to quote Sara Ruddick – “making it up” and, thus, running the risk of a blurring or a conflation of voices – the women's and mine.

This leads to the final challenge that confronts the methodology adopted in this study: the subjectivity of the narrative methodology.

In various ways, I have already alluded to this limitation in the foregoing considerations. Given the characteristically contextualized nature of this methodology, a valid implication for the rest of this study is the limitedness of the claims that I make for women in Africa. No matter how powerful the narratives, stories, and accounts, they are situated and contingent on particular experiences of the “narrators.” The process of extrapolating or inferring their meaning and import would seem then a necessary methodological evil that would be pretentious to the extent that it makes universal claims

for all women without qualification. While this study notes this methodological trap and strives to avoid it, it provides no guarantees for evading it completely in the conclusions that it makes.

To turn now to the field of practical theology, it can help remedy some of the shortcomings and limitations of the methodology adopted for this study. Practical theology recognizes the importance of experience and corresponding narrative account. Some lessons on the appropriate use of narrative from practical theology, especially in regard to making theological statements, can be summarized as follows.

To begin with a concrete example, in the context of the use of narrative in homiletics in Black Theology, Dale Andrews makes an important observation about the connective power of narrative, that is, between the “narrator” or “preacher” and the “hearer,” which allows both to enter into and to envision the story.⁵⁹ Applied to the purposes of theological reflection, the immediacy and intimacy of the emotional connection neither substitute for nor obviate the imperative of a critical and consistent analysis. Yet the challenge is real and it also confronts this study. Picking up a point from four paragraphs back, as I demonstrate in chapter 2 and chapter 3, I, too, have a story to tell. It follows that, as an African woman, I can identify immediately and personally with the stories, accounts, and narratives of the African women presented in this study. This challenge surfaces the vital importance of maintaining a constructive tension between the experience that I present and the interpretation (including claims and conclusions) that I operate.⁶⁰ They do not equate each other.

At the conclusion of his critical presentation and assessment of Latino practical theology, Allan Figueroa Deck notes the significance of cultivating habitual “cultural discernment” as “a practical theological skill more prized than ever before.”⁶¹ The components of this theological skill recall the point made above about the danger of cultural romanticism that casts a shadow on the anthropological model. In reality, and as

⁵⁹ Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 20-21.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 96-98.

⁶¹ Allan Figueroa Deck, “A Latino Practical Theology: Mapping the Road Ahead,” *Theological Studies* 65 (2004): 275-297 at 297.

it applies to this study, what Deck calls “cultural discernment” would entail as a minimum the capacity not only to affirm “the good, the true and the beautiful in each and every culture,” but also the courage to stress “gospel-based values that critique the dehumanizing tendencies of every culture,” including the culture of the community called church and the new spiritual identity that this study will attempt to portray.⁶²

More importantly, however, in relation to Deck’s idea of “cultural discernment,” although I adopt a narrative methodology based on the anthropological model, a measure of methodological flexibility is called for, as Uzukwu also notes. There are limits to any methodological construct, thus necessitating the need to avoid a certain analytical rigidity that skews eventual claims and conclusions. As Stephen Pattison and James Woodward point out, “practical theologians need to be flexible in the methods they use. They must be prepared to engage interdisciplinary learning because the theological tradition does not in itself provide all the information about the modern world that is needed to have a good understanding of many issues.”⁶³ I have stressed this point of interdisciplinary learning.

A final important lesson from practical theology for this study is the fact that theological knowledge or wisdom is not a given. Put differently, the theological import of any given account, story, or narrative is not self-evident – as if it were a matter of divine revelation. Yet the process of establishing theological claims need not become a convoluted and impenetrable analytical fortress. Among many things, this raises the question of the concreteness and relevance of theological inquiry. As this study will consistently attempt to demonstrate, to give a theological account of the lived realities of people, it is important to avoid allowing the discourse to evaporate into high theological abstraction and speculation. Far from being an antecedent exercise packaged in isolated and insulated academic settings for an elitist clientele, its key outcome is to be judged in

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Stephen Pattison and James Woodward, “An Introduction to Pastoral and Practical Theology” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. James Woodward, Stephen Pattison, John Patton, and Emmanuel Lartey (Oxford, UK; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 9. I note that the approach adopted in this study would necessarily diverge from that of some proponents of practical theology, like Don Browning, who prioritizes understanding the mechanics and dynamics of religious communities over the individual’s attempt to make theological sense and meaning of lived realities. Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

part on its relevance for the masses. Oftentimes there is a noticeable disconnect between theology as it is solemnly professed and the lived realities of people. This is an important consideration for this study and a lesson for African theologians.

Paul Gifford's critique of Africa's theological agenda highlights "the gulf between élite academic theology and Christian developments in Africa today, and ... how marginal mainline academic theology is. It is done by Western-trained professionals, largely for Western consumption ... and seems sometimes quite unrelated to the significant developments afoot."⁶⁴ The study takes Gifford's critique seriously; in fact, addressing the dissonance or gap between rhetoric and practice as it affects the lives of poor African women in church and society is one of the cornerstones of this study. Naming these practices, especially as structural sins, is important in this study, as is the imperative of moving from narration to action, which forms part of the purpose of a proposal for liberation spirituality in chapter 5.⁶⁵

A final note on methodology. In some rare instances, I use the expression "the African woman." I am aware that this risks essentializing what is in reality a vastly diverse human reality. However, I use the expression metaphorically as a way of shaping a vision that has yet to find fulfilment or even consensus among African women but that nevertheless expresses a biblical, theological way of being that I offer as a source of hope and inspiration for the women of Africa.

Outline of Chapters

This study consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 examines the mechanism of the construction of gender identities and roles of African women. An important key for this analysis is the nexus of religion, motherhood, and poverty. This key is provided by Tina Beattie, who is pioneering theological reflection inspired by the shocking reality of maternal mortality especially as it affects poor women across the world and impedes

⁶⁴ Gifford, *African Christianity*, 333.

⁶⁵ See Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Introduction: the Contributions of Practical Theology" in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd: 2014), 1-20; see also, Evelyn L. Parker, "Womanist Theory," in Miller-McLemore, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, 204-213.

opportunities for their human flourishing.

In chapter 1, I will conduct a critical review of current literature on women's roles and identities with particular emphasis on doctrinal and ideological constraints imposed by ecclesiastical and hierarchical leadership, cultural biases, unconscious assumptions, and entrenched ritual traditions in Africa that underpin and aggravate these artificially created limitations. One example of this process of religious, cultural, and social degradation and dehumanization of the feminine involves identifying women exclusively as wives and mothers having a purely biological function.

To illustrate the sources of these constraints, I will offer a critical account of official internal narratives of the Catholic Church (such as the first African synod in 1994 and the second African synod in 2009) about women in regard to ministry, participation in leadership, and decision making. The aim is to unmask the reality of the oppression and marginalization of women concealed in official church texts. While on the surface they appear benign and well intentioned, a more incisive analysis reveals how they actually exacerbate the oppressive condition of women. The reason for this is not the absence of lofty rhetoric but the distraction that rhetoric can occasion, deflecting as it were attention from the situation of pain, suffering, and death that confront many women in Africa whose lives have been reduced to reproducing children.

Thus, one element that will become clearer in the analysis is the gap between rhetoric and practice in regard to the treatment of women in the context of ministry and leadership and decision making in religion, culture, and society.

Chapter 2 focuses on developing an inventory of resources generated by women for examining the assumptions, biases, and traditions surfaced in the preceding chapter in view of generating new paradigms and narratives. A significant portion of this chapter will be devoted to examining the literature generated by African women theologians across denominational affiliations and allegiances including African women in dialogue with the world church. I will emphasize factors such as the cultural and structural processes of socialization that negate women's voices and repress their resistance.

African women do not speak only about themselves or limit their narratives to rhetorical accounts. Besides their words, there are examples, models, and inspiration in African society of how women have witnessed to new paradigms and narratives of self-

worth and self-definition in the face of entrenched cultural, religious, and social biases. They are able to name the challenges that confront them such as maternal mortality and infant mortality. Thus, in this chapter, much space and analysis will be devoted to discussing the experience of “mothering” and “motherhood” from a nonbiological and inclusive perspective, that is, in ways that are liberating for women and men alike. The ultimate objective will be to demonstrate the life-giving and life-affirming phenomenon of mothering as a gift offered to women and men for the attainment of human flourishing in a just and equal church and society.

Chapter 3 gives inspiring examples of African women who are living witnesses and prophetic voices as leaders on the continent. They incarnate mothering and motherhood in ways that integrate birthing and transform it into an experience of nurturing and protecting the lives of all women and men without exception and free of oppressive biologism. This chapter will further demonstrate how their prophetic practices serve as alternative models of life-giving leadership and ministry in church and society. In particular, I argue that the narratives of African women, their examples, and their praxis are embodiments of the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the church and the world.

My intention is not to generate an exhaustive inventory of African women’s narratives; those used in this study illustrate and exemplify a much wider phenomenon of African women offering alternative paths of renewal and transformation for their communities and societies.

Chapter 4 supplies the historical and biblical warrants for the preceding chapters. Conscious of the fact that it is not enough to deconstruct existing models, frameworks, and practices in relation to the subject under consideration, this chapter will examine how the study of the roles and identities of African women necessarily implicates the history of Christianity especially because of how women have experienced oppression and subjugation in the (Western) patriarchal church system and colonization.

In chapter 4, I will focus particular attention on biblical narratives that serve as foundations of women’s roles as disciples, preachers, and leaders in church and society. Though my aim is not to turn this thesis into an exercise in biblical exegesis, paying attention to scripture and women’s roles and identities in it serves an important purpose. In particular, it shows how alternative interpretations, meanings, and understandings can

be derived from texts that have hitherto been pressed to serve patriarchal and androcentric agendas and constructs. The key purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how many women in scriptural traditions model maternal leadership and what maternal leadership looks like in the context of patriarchy and the tendency to silence and oppress women.

The chapter will further highlight the vital connection between these maternal disciples and leadership roles and the life and mission of Jesus Christ, who empowers disciples in ways that overcome the hindrances and biases of patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny. Thus, an important component of this chapter is the exploration of Christological approaches that allow us to answer the question, Who is Christ for African women?

Chapter 5 will explore the spiritual foundations of narratives and paradigms for validating the role and participation of women in ministry and leadership in Africa and the world church. In particular, it will explore the understanding of motherhood in regard to the incomprehensible mystery of God and the importance of imaging God through the face of African women as mothers of life endowed with dignity and equality and as intelligent educators, leaders, and mentors. Also, this chapter will identify elements of a spirituality of liberation that grounds the inalienable worth and beauty of women as icons of leadership and transformation in church and society.

This rationale for integrating spirituality more closely into my line of thinking is based in part on the understanding—especially in light of chapters 3 and 4—that spirituality, not religion, is the best-kept secret for affirming the freedom of many African women from the domination of patriarchy in African feminist discourse. Accordingly, this concluding chapter leans heavily on spirituality. In it, I will attempt to trace much more sharply the contours of the unique identity, spirituality, and quest for liberation and human flourishing of African women.

Overall, this final chapter will be more reflective and wide ranging than analytical and circumscribed. I will allow myself much liberty in constructing a personal concluding reflection and discourse that draw on the contents and arguments of the preceding chapters. One way of looking at this chapter is to see it as my attempt to distill the qualities, richness, and depth of the lives of the African women I have encountered in

and through this thesis into an ode to the empowering and liberating spirituality of the African woman.

At the end of this journey of encounter and discovery, the key findings of this study will be summarized in brief concluding remarks. Essentially, these remarks will show how this thesis opens up new vistas and creates a creative theological framework for understanding, recognizing, and including the roles, identities, and mission of women in a renewed theological self-understanding of the community called church in Africa and beyond.

My concluding remarks are not intended as the last word on the roles and identities of African women in church and society. What is important to keep in mind is the vast array of potential, prospects, and promises that their gifts, qualities, and leadership hold for the renewal and transformation of church and society and in the process the flourishing of all women and men created in the image and likeness of God.

Chapter 1

The Unholy Trinity of Religion, Motherhood, and Poverty

I am woman
 I am African
 Here I sit—not idle
 But busy stringing my beads
 I wear them in my hair
 I wear them in my ears
 They go round my neck, my arms
 My wrist, my calves and my ankles
 Around my waist will go the
 Most precious of them all
 And from this hidden strength
 Will burst forth the New Me—for
 I am in the process of giving birth
 To myself—recreating Me
 Of being, the Me that God sees.
 I am woman
 I am African,
 My beads mark my presence
 And when I am gone
 My beads will remain.⁶⁶

Introduction

These words of Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye encapsulate the profound yearning of an African woman to become wholly herself. This poem celebrates the power of her self-identification and self-construction. Every woman is looking for her

⁶⁶ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), frontispiece.

true self—a beautiful self endowed with dignity and worthy of respect. Each is claiming her right to a place in humanity's story. The challenges confronting the women of Africa who carry the heart of Africa in their very being stem from distortions of culture, religion, tradition, church, and the impregnable walls of patriarchy.

The quest of many African women is to discover themselves in fullness beyond the societal conflation of womanhood and motherhood. The confluence of womanhood, motherhood, and fullness leads to an encounter with divinity that cries out for liberating love from the shackles and societal prison of religious, cultural, and social degradation and dehumanization of the feminine because it identifies women as mothers with purely biological functions. As Ifi Amadiume notes,

Maternity is viewed as sacred in the traditions of all African societies. And in all of them, the earth's fertility is traditionally linked to women's maternal powers. Hence the centrality of women as producers and providers and the reverence in which they are held.⁶⁷

In this context, women yearn to be fulfilled fully and completely as human persons and in the process reveal the glory and the beauty of the one who created and formed them in love. The challenges they face come from a biased construct of their gender roles in religion and culture compounded by the multifaceted reality of poverty. In the first section, I will examine the mechanisms of this construction.

As I will demonstrate in this chapter and in the entire thesis, the facts about poverty are stark with regard to women in Africa. I proceed from the premise that in sub-Saharan Africa, poverty is a gendered phenomenon. The indices of its impact on women comprise a wide variety of concrete experiences including unequal access to the means of economic production (land and capital), social opportunities (education and health), and harmful sociocultural practices including varieties of sexual, gender-based violence and discrimination. In several sub-Saharan countries, between 48 and 65 percent of women live in poverty; on average, only 15 percent of them are landowners; and more than 20 percent are undernourished. Furthermore, between 36 and 71 percent of women

⁶⁷ Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987), 191.

have been the victims of sexual or physical violence by close partners.

On the subcontinent, 3 million girls face the threat of female genital mutilation. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, 1.8 million women—one woman a minute—were raped in 2011. In Nigeria, 5.5 million girls do not have access to basic primary education. Yet it is estimated that if all women in sub-Saharan Africa were given the opportunity to complete primary education, there would be 70 percent fewer maternal deaths, which would mean saving the lives of 113,400 women.⁶⁸ The second section will focus more specifically on maternal mortality and the reality of poverty for many African women.

Notwithstanding the appalling reality represented by these statistics, we must avoid generalizations. Some African women have attained relative economic affluence and social influence as part of a growing middle class and consequently freedom from the constraints of social, economic, and cultural marginalization and oppression. But they are the minority. The poor majority rather than the affluent minority constitutes the focus of this study. As statistics show, the majority of poor African women have been left behind and struggle with the crushing burden of existence defined under the general category of poverty.

In the final two sections, I will demonstrate the gap between official ecclesial rhetoric that extolls the value of women as wives and mothers and the reality of their lives blighted by poverty and maternal mortality. My goal is to demonstrate that the uncritical assumptions of lofty ecclesial rhetoric and theological discourse may actually exacerbate rather than alleviate the condition of women in church and society.

⁶⁸ See Women Thrive Worldwide, “Women and Poverty in Africa: a look at the numbers,”

http://www.womenthrive.org/sites/default/files/docs/resources/women_poverty_in_africa_a_look_at_the_numbers_1.pdf; UNESCO, “Girls Education: the facts” <http://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sites/gem-report/files/girls-factsheet-en.pdf> (accessed October 19, 2016). UNHCR, <http://www.unhcr.org/5319e1ae9.html> (accessed October 19, 2015).

1. The Construction of Identities: African Women in Religion, Culture, and Society

Religion and culture collude in the construction of women's roles and identities, and the outcome is social degradation and dehumanization of the feminine by identifying women as mothers with purely biological functions. In the African religious worldview, it is often difficult to adequately distinguish between religion, spirituality, and culture, but there is an African culture that is not a pure fact but a reality constructed by the patriarchal and androcentric framework of African societies. One African culture hardly resembles another. In the midst of this diversity, one reality holds eminently true: Africans are a very deeply religious people.⁶⁹

One of such experience of sacredness in the African religious worldview and practice is motherhood. Mercy Amba Oduyoye states this fact clearly.

Procreation is the most important factor governing marriages in Africa ... the fertility of the woman is the biological foundation of marriage and it governs male-female relations within the institution. Motherhood is a highly valued role open only to women but desired by both men and women as well as society as a whole; it is the channel by which men reproduce themselves and continue the family name and it is the channel by which women actualize their psycho-religious need to be the source of life.⁷⁰

This valorization of procreation has the consequence of limiting women's identities and roles to biological functions. There is a more disturbing consequence of this reductionist hermeneutics. In this context, as Sara Ruddick observes in her book *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*, "women's culture ... [becomes] invisible, silenced, trivialized, and wholly ignored."⁷¹ The silencing of women's culture is not peculiar to Africa; it is a wider phenomenon. As Rita Gross notes,

Only when we began to ask why women so rarely appeared on the pages

⁶⁹ Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 140.

⁷⁰ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995, 2002), 141–42.

⁷¹ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (London: The Women's Press, 1990), 9.

of books we read, even in descriptive accounts of religion, did we begin to figure out that the model of humanity we had imbibed from our culture made women invisible or that there were alternatives to that model of humanity.⁷²

That women's culture is silenced or rendered invisible does not amount to saying it does not exist. As Ruddick asks, "Could it be that 'women are *even now* thinking in ways which traditional intellection denies, decries or is unable to grasp,' as Adrienne Rich asked in 1976?"⁷³ Ruddick's question focuses attention on how women think, understand themselves, and act as humans in contrast to how they are perceived and their roles constructed in culture, religion, church, and society.

Ruddick's critical approach is applicable to the situation of women in Africa. In this context is a theological and methodological imperative to integrate African women's religious symbols and expressions into African Christianity; the entire maternal context needs to be woven into any theological debate that calls itself Christian and a discourse on culture that is recognizably African.

The focus on the maternal is a subversive exercise precisely because it shifts the discourse from maternal as biological to maternal as intellection and creation. It is a kind of thinking, according to Ruddick, "to which mothering gives rise—maternal thinking."⁷⁴ It is contrary to the thinking that religion and culture foist on African girls who must grow to think of themselves exclusively as women who should be mothers and wives. In this regard, "Women's experience of being persons primarily in relation to others—as mother or as wife—predominates in Africa. A woman's social status depends on these relationships and not on any qualities or achievements of her own."⁷⁵

⁷² Rita M. Gross, "Where Have We Been? Where Do We Need To Go? Women's Studies and Gender in Religion and Feminist Theology," in *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-cultural Perspectives*, ed. Ursula King and Tina Beattie (London: Continuum, 2005), 17–18.

⁷³ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 122.

African women continue to engage in a struggle to assert themselves and be accepted by their male counterparts as humans and equal members of the *imago Dei* and not just for functional roles as procreators and mothers. The significance of this gradual expanding and questioning of the missing roles and identities of women by women cannot be overstated especially because, as I will discuss in the following section, motherhood defined in purely procreative and biological terms represents a danger to women from the global south who continue to face the highest maternal death rates in the world. The lack of interest and discussion on reproductive rights and maternal well-being in the church's documents reveals the deep, ideological constraints imposed by ecclesiastical and hierarchical leadership on women. Oduyoye summarizes and names this alarming reality:

When I look at the mold in which religion has cast women, the psychological binds of socioeconomic realities that hold us in place, our political powerlessness, and the daily diminution of our domestic influence by Western-type patriarchal norms, I call what I see injustice. No other word fits.⁷⁶

Oduyoye's assessment is an indictment of Christian religion in Africa. On the surface, without deep knowledge and research into the lives and struggles of African women, we are tempted to imagine that Christianity brought civilization and liberation to African women; the contrary may have been truer. For Oduyoye, "this is a myth, a claim glibly made and difficult to illustrate with concrete or continuing examples."⁷⁷ She continues, "What actual difference has Christianity made for women other than its attempt to foist the image of a European middle-class housewife on an Africa that had no middle class that earned salaries or lived on investments?"⁷⁸

Oduyoye uncovers collusion between missionary Christianity and African Christianity in constructing the reality in which African women find themselves. For her, it is obvious that

⁷⁶ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 157.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

the way western churches that have been implanted in Africa look at women mirrors their Euro-European predecessors ... they have not yet grown free of the attitudes of their “mother churches,” nor have they been able to cope with reforms that have taken or are taking place in those churches.⁷⁹

Like its Western counterparts, “these churches, which most often take the form of patriarchal hierarchies, accept the material services of women but do not listen to their voices, seek their leadership, or welcome their initiatives.”⁸⁰ The two most potent tools of this process of subjugation are biblical hermeneutics and theology.

The church in Africa often freely uses biblical texts to support the subjugation of women; the Bible becomes a reference point for reminding women of their second-class nature, a phenomenon I will examine in depth in chapter 4. As Oduyoye argues, “Although the Christian heritage of the biblical, prophetic denunciation of oppression has served Africa well, oppressive strands of the same Bible do reinforce the traditional socio-cultural oppression of women.”⁸¹

Theology plays a role as well as does the Bible. One of the contributing factors to the oppression of women in Africa is the conflation of gender and divinity. In the words of Oduyoye, “Visualizing God as male and experiencing leadership as a male prerogative have blinded the church to the absence or presence of women.”⁸² Consequently, “In Africa, a collaboration between the traditions of Hebrew Scripture and aspects of traditional religion has affected the nearly total exclusion of women from rituals; this naturally militates against women priests.”⁸³

There is an awareness in the church of the inadequacy of women’s situations, but official response falls short of a just and equitable arrangement. This response takes one of two forms. The first creates ministries that reinforce biological thinking about women, and the second advances a justification based on the idea of complementarity.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 172–73.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 173.

⁸¹ Ibid., 175–76.

⁸² Ibid., 176.

⁸³ Ibid.

In contemporary Catholic theology, this notion of complementarity goes back to a series of 129 allocutions delivered by Pope John Paul II between September 5, 1979, and November 28, 1984. In the context of church teaching on sexual ethics and Christian anthropology, complementarity represents an attempt by the pope to define the relationship between the two genders. According to his understanding, both are intrinsically linked to the point that neither can attain a wholeness on its own; both desire to attain the fullness of meaning of human nature and existence.

In particular, complementarity applies to the reality of marriage as an intimate union of two bodies and souls natural to the feminine/masculine reality of creation whether they are ordered intentionally toward mutual love of a man and a woman or the reproductive function of that union. Essentially, the idea of complementarity means that woman and man complement and complete each other as “mutual gift to each other,” where the privileged place for this experience is the context of marital union.

In the context of this study, the components of this circle of complementarity are neither equal nor do they enjoy equal dignity notwithstanding the protestations of John Paul II that each individual embodies in his or her nature the *imago Dei* fully and completely. The notion of complementarity cannot be considered in isolation of social, cultural, ideological, and doctrinal constructs. A theology of the body founded on complementarity loses credibility if it fails to account for the strong influence of patriarchy in church and society and on the articulation of the relationship between women and men envisaged by this notion. The irrefutable evidence that this relationship is skewed in favor of one half—as I demonstrate in this chapter—undermines the credibility and applicability of the notion.

Another critical dimension is the biologism of complementarity as envisaged by John Paul II. At the core of this thesis is the contention that the unqualified assignment of the role of biological motherhood to women obscures and hinders their ability to image and model important roles as icons of discipleship, courageous leaders, exemplary educators, and intelligent mentors. Appealing as this notion might seem at face value, it is seriously contradicted by the concrete experience of women as the narratives in thesis

demonstrate.⁸⁴

Oduyoye is rightly critical of the use of the principle of complementarity as justification for this attitude toward women in regard to ministry:

In assigning roles based on gender, the theory of complementarity plays a negative role for women in domestic organizations and in the church. In practice, complementarity allows the man to choose what he wants to be and to do and then demands that the woman fill in the blanks. It is the woman, invariably who complements the man⁸⁵ ... The woman has little or no choice in the matter—she has to do “the rest” if the community is to remain whole and healthy.⁸⁶

Fortunately, today, “some women have awakened to the fact that they have surrendered not only to a ‘man’-made world but also to a ‘man’-made God who has decreed their isolation from public life and sentenced them to serve in obscurity and silence.”⁸⁷

The attitude that Oduyoye and other African women decry is not a creation of the African church or African theology; it has deep roots in Christian history and tradition and the wider cultural milieu in which both grew and were nurtured. This is a thesis that Rosemary Radford Ruether has explored in depth. According to her,

⁸⁴ The essential elements of this notion of complementarity and theology of the body according to Pope John Paul II are contained in the following sources: Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, (apostolic exhortation on the role of the Christian family in the modern world), 22 November 1981 (http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html); “Letter to Women,” 29 June 1995 (https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_29061995_women.html); “General Audiences (129 audience talks): John Paul II’s Theology of the Body” (<https://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP2TBIND.HTM>) (accessed October 19, 2016).

⁸⁵ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 177.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 178.

The oppressive force of Christianity for women and other subjugated people comes, not primarily from this or that specific doctrine, but from a patriarchal reading of the whole system of Christian symbols. Yet these same symbols can be liberating, read from a prophetic, liberationist perspective.⁸⁸

In this light, Beattie observes,

Feminist theologians also argue that a gendered understanding of God entered Christianity through the doorway of Greek thought, so that biblical patriarchy was shored up by a range of sexual stereotypes associated not with the Bible but with Greek philosophy.⁸⁹

Her position aligns with that of Radford Ruether, who claim the New Testament

contains the remnants of a subversive Christianity which has been overlaid by a patriarchal understanding ... by looking at the particular readings of these symbols, it will become evident that this was constructed, not simply as particular “prejudices” of specific theologians, appealing here and there in Christian thought, but as a comprehensive system and worldview.⁹⁰

To further illustrate Ruether’s and Beattie’s claims, let us consider the question of woman’s soul. According to Ruether,

Early Christianity saw a close relation between the human soul, specifically the mind or reason, and the divine *Logos* or *Nous*, which was seen as the divine nature of the Christ. They interpreted the idea in Genesis 1:27 that God created humanity in the image of God to refer to the mind or soul in each human person. The human soul as mind or reason mirrors the divine Reason/Christ. As a reflection of the divine Mind, the soul partakes in a created fashion of God’s spiritual nature and hence is immortal and capable of eternal life. But do women possess reason and hence the image of God, or only men? The Greek philosophical tradition, exemplified by Aristotle, saw women as lacking autonomous reason and

⁸⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Oppressive Aspects of Christianity,” in *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Buddhist-Christian Conversation*, ed. Rita M. Gross and Rosemary Radford Ruether (London: Continuum, 2001), 88.

⁸⁹ Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason & The War on Religion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007), 127.

⁹⁰ Radford Ruether, “Oppressive Aspects of Christianity,” 88–89.

being inherently inferior and dependent on the male.⁹¹

Over the centuries, the implication of this line of thinking has had disastrous consequences for women: “It is man, not woman, who has been understood to be made in the image of God. As a result, masculinity has come to signify transcendence, divinity, reason and order, while femininity signifies bodiless, nature, passion and chaos.”⁹² Oduyoye agrees with Beattie and Radford Ruether. In this regard, Christianity has promoted a “monolithic patriarchy ... in which male and female are rigidly opposed to each other.”⁹³ This pattern of thought has been transposed to and transplanted in Africa Christianity and ecclesiology. “It is the Western idea that man (the greater) contains woman (the lesser) that has captured the African mind.”⁹⁴ This is unlike what one perceives in the stories of creation in African religious mythology, which has no creation story of an Eve. In these stories, as Oduyoye points out, “a woman is simply a human being; she does not have to prove that her way of being is as human as that of a man.”⁹⁵ Consequently, made in the image and likeness of God, “her destiny as a woman is not derived from a man’s destiny.”⁹⁶ Not to accept or to resist this fact demeans and impoverishes her dignity. The following section offers a concrete illustration of the conditions of such resistance.

2. Swimming in a River Full of Crocodiles: Poverty and Maternal Mortality

British theologian Tina Beattie observes that despite his rhetoric and acknowledgment of “the need to give women a greater say in the life of the church,” Pope Francis “has done little to improve women’s lives.” She laments,

If the pope wants a church that prioritises the needs of the poor, then addressing women’s reproductive wellbeing is fundamental to that goal.

⁹¹ Ibid., 89.

⁹² Beattie, *The New Atheists*, 127.

⁹³ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 157.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 158.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Maternal mortality is often a direct consequence of poverty. Of an estimated 280,000 maternal deaths a year, 99% occur in the world's poorest countries—mostly in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia. Good obstetric care would prevent most of these deaths, but issues of contraception and abortion raise more contested ethical issues.⁹⁷

Beattie's argument is compelling precisely because she is the first theologian to argue the legitimacy of the maternal mortality viewed as a consequence of poverty and gender construct and as a critical theological and ecclesiological issue especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In her words, "Poverty impacts unrelentingly and acutely on women's lives, and nowhere does the absence of women's influence manifest itself so clearly as around the church's teachings on sexual and reproductive ethics."⁹⁸ For her, the "scholarly lacunae" on maternal mortality in theological discourse doubles as "silence" that itself is a form of oppression:

Some countries in sub-Saharan Africa have the highest maternal mortality rates in the world, yet maternal death and suffering barely feature in the work of African theologians. Official church teaching is almost entirely silent on the subject, though it has a great deal to say about the gifts, roles, and responsibilities of mothers. Maternal mortality has generated much published research in the social sciences and health and development studies, but these are secularized disciplines that rarely take into account the vast significance of religion for African women. Even when they do, they tend to do so from a sociological rather than a theological perspective.

Underlying these scholarly *lacunae* is the silence of women whose lives are formed in the nexus of religion, motherhood, and poverty. Their personal stories of suffering and hope do not shape our theological narratives, despite the fact that ... maternal metaphors are a significant feature of biblical discourse about the nature of God.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/aug/27/pope-francis-womens-lives-catholic-church?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other (accessed October 15, 2015).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Tina Beattie, "Maternal Wellbeing in Sub-Saharan Africa: From Silent Suffering to Human Flourishing," in *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*,

Much evidence backs up the saliency and urgency of Beattie's position. The following voices are some responses to a question by the British Broadcasting Corporation on how safe it is to be a mother in Africa: "What is it like being pregnant in Africa? Are you hopeful or fearful? Do you think that your health facilities are good enough? How can we stop women from dying during childbirth?"¹⁰⁰

A lot of pregnant women are at the mercy of God. A friend just lost a sister recently during childbirth. It is pathetic that in this day and age, maternal health is still an issue in Africa. May God help our pregnant women. (Omorodion Osula, a Nigerian in the United States)

It's hard to be pregnant in Africa. I think most women need prenatal checkups and immediate treatment of diseases like malaria and anemia. In addition to having a skilled attendant during delivery, it is also important for women with complications to reach emergency obstetric care. (Musyoka Mua Makato, Kenya)

I experienced the pain of loss when my half-sister lost her life and her unborn baby in August last year. She died at the hospital after doctors ran short of ideas of how to save her and her baby. Earlier this year, my biological sister delivered a still child. She did not lose her own life, but she lost a lot of blood. This has left her indisposed and looking as thin as a starving refugee. Health facilities in Africa need to be overhauled and manned by more competent personnel. (A Tanko, Ghana)

The majority of these deaths are among the poor and uneducated women. Empowering them will ensure that they make informed decisions about when to seek help without waiting endlessly for the man to come back from work before the woman is taken to the hospital. (Dr. Christopher Enakpene, a Nigerian in Germany)

Being pregnant in a developing nation is like being on a death penalty. The chances of survival are 50 percent. (Sidney Mwewa, Zambia)

I myself lost a sister as a result of this problem. The world can do something to help. We ask now to those who are privileged to assist our continent to reduce this long-standing problem. (Abubakar Kamara, a Guinean in the United States)

ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016), 175–76.

¹⁰⁰ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4227364.stm> (accessed October 18, 2015).

To be pregnant in Africa is as dangerous as swimming in a river full of crocodiles. The problem is aggravated by deep-rooted male dominance in many societies. Yes, women empowerment will help. However, I believe there needs to be male counselling prior to any marriage and to ensure that men participate in helping their wives plan the births. (Issaya Ernest, Tanzania)

Being pregnant in Africa is like watching the sun going down before you get home. It's all gloomy and there's no light shining down the way, only uncertainty and desperation. African nations must fight against all odds to extend health care to those who remain far from reach. In Mozambique, for instance, in the Zambezi central province populations must cross the Zambezi River in search of medical care. The crossing takes three days, and the pregnant may either give birth on the slow sailing boats or find death before reaching the other side of the river. (Leonel Muchano, Maputo, Mozambique)

An educated African woman, with a sense of empowerment and control over her body, is the only way we can even come close to reducing the number of maternal deaths in Africa. She should be educated in health, nutrition, hygiene, family planning, birth control, etc. (Ada Nwachuku, a Nigerian in the United States)

To be pregnant in Africa is to be haunted by the ghost of death—either before childbirth, during labor, or soon after birth. Women are not happy during their entire nine months. (Rabbyce Kittermaster, Malawi/Switzerland)

Being pregnant in Africa is really terrifying and people really do not know what will happen during delivery. Health facilities are adequate but there are no drugs and the personnel to man those facilities. The shortage of personnel is compounded by the brain drain. Africa is losing a lot of qualified personnel to well developed countries like Europe. These problems could be stopped by restricting qualified personnel from going to developed countries. Family planning should also be encouraged. Early marriage should also be discouraged by sending young people to school. People should be taught the importance of getting married when they are mentally and financially mature. (Benard Wundaninge Kamenya, Malawi)

I am a fifty-six-year-old Ethiopian residing in the United States. When my mother died due to birth complications, I was only twelve years old. I vividly remember the day. Medicine women (locally known by the name Awaladge) were sitting by her bed, massaging her stomach and spitting gnawed plant leaves and roots all over her body. After two days of suffering, she became unconscious, and they took her to the hospital

where she died. The question can we stop maternal deaths opened a scar in my heart. The government and local civic leaders need to wake up and find a way to save the lives of our mothers and sisters. (Yemane, Cedar Hill, Texas)

What you need to do is ask those who are directly affected in villages, those who use traditional birth attendants, those who can use the local language, otherwise you do not give the whole picture. Maternal deaths happen everywhere on earth, but it is the degree which is scaring black Africa. And yes, they can be stopped, but we need to address health and education systems, give people something sustainable to do and add incentives to space out children and childbirth. (Mtamandeni Kalilangwe, Malawi)

Myriad other manifestations of poverty besides maternal death impinge directly on the lives of women in Africa; these include HIV/AIDS and forced displacement; I mention them to illustrate without digressing in too extensive an analysis.

Women are especially vulnerable to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. “A study in South Africa recently suggested that nearly one in seven cases of young women acquiring HIV could have been prevented if the women had not been subjected to intimate partner violence.”¹⁰¹ This violence occurs in a variety of ways, including “sexual abuse, forced marriage, forced divorce, early marriage, high rate of abortion, incessant cases of rape, genital mutilation, human trafficking (among girls and women) being sold abroad to play pornographic movies.”¹⁰² The product of the sociocultural construction and oppression of the feminine gender in Africa is seen in relief especially through the lenses of women affected by HIV/AIDS. Ronald Nicolson states: “It is a sickness of the poor. It is a sickness of the Third World. It is a sickness of women and children.”¹⁰³ For all of these

¹⁰¹ <http://www.amfar.org/about-hiv-and-aids/facts-and-stats/statistics--women-and-hiv-aids/> (UNAIDS report on the global AIDS epidemic 2013; UNAIDS Fact Sheet 2013; U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed March 9, 2015).

¹⁰² Gregory Ejiogu, Umunna, “Gender inequality and HIV/AIDS,” *Afer* 52 no. 4–1 (December 1, 2011): 195–218, at 195.

¹⁰³ Ronald Nicolson, *God in AIDS? A Theological Enquiry* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 82.

categories of people, “AIDS still carries a death sentence.”¹⁰⁴ In particular, “women need money to feed, clothe and educate their children. Poverty makes them forget the risk of HIV/AIDS.”¹⁰⁵ Women without other resources have only their own persons and their own bodies to sell in an act of desperation and survival. When they eventually succumb to the “death sentence” of AIDS, the responsibility passes on to their vulnerable orphans—and the cycle of poverty, disease, and death continues with fatal regularity.¹⁰⁶

A second area is the phenomenon of forced displacement and migration. The statistics are horrifying: “In sum, it is expected that a total of some 11 million people will be of concern to UNHCR in Africa in 2014, including stateless people and returnees.”¹⁰⁷ Women and their children form a sizable majority of refugees and displaced people in Africa; they are especially vulnerable in the case of refugees or displacement.

Yet it is critical to underline the fact that considered in the context of maternal mortality, poverty is not reducible merely to anecdotal narratives and accounts, nor is the issue simply definitional. It is about people, especially women, their lives, their survival, and their dignity.

In 2009, Obiageli Ezekwesli, World Bank vice president for the African region, painted a harrowing portrait of the African woman:

The face of poverty is female ... she is 18.5 years old. She lives in a rural area. She has dropped out of school. She is single but is about to be married or be given in marriage to a man approximately twice her age. She

¹⁰⁴ Casimir Ruzindaza, *Living Positively with AIDS: An African Experience* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2001), 8.

¹⁰⁵ Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, *From Crisis to Kairos: the Mission of the Church in the Time of HIV/AIDS, Refugees and Poverty* (Nairobi: Kenya, Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), 186.

¹⁰⁶ Barbara Bailey, “Feminization of Poverty across Pan-African Societies: The Church’s Response—Alleviative or Emancipatory?” in *Religion and Poverty: Pan-African Perspectives*, ed. Peter J. Paris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 39.

¹⁰⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
<http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3642.html> (accessed October 19, 2015).

will be the mother of six or seven kids in another 20 years.¹⁰⁸

And the other side of the story is that she might not even make it. Her life span is cut short by the experience she will have in childbearing, because “more than half a million women die from complications in pregnancy and childbirth every year—that’s one death every minute and in Africa, this means one woman in 16 dies.”¹⁰⁹

Having traveled to several parts of Africa and encountered firsthand the living conditions of women in many parts of the continent, I argue that while their experiences, situations, and circumstances are varied, women share many things in common. One such commonality is the burden of survival in the harsh terrain of their families and society at large and their church. This is highly manifested in the high rate of maternal mortality across the continent. Women face multiple hurdles and challenges in order to survive childbirth. The statistics are harrowing: “Maternal mortality rates in West Africa are among the highest in the world. One in every 30 Nigerian mothers dies in childbirth compared with one in every 30,000 in Sweden.”¹¹⁰

Thus, the lives of many African women who continue to live in poverty are marked by struggles and challenges. They face subordination by the men, they work hard to raise their children, and they are backbones and hearts of their families in spite of their limited economic resources and opportunities. Their joys and hopes are dim considering they often still have to depend on men to provide security for themselves and their

¹⁰⁸<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/AFRICAEXT/0,,contentMDK:22182932~menuPK:258657~pagePK:2865106~piPK:2865128~theSitePK:258644,00.html> (accessed October 15, 2015).

¹⁰⁹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4227364.stm> (accessed October 15, 2015); see *Trends in Maternal Mortality 1990–2013*, estimates by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, The World Bank and the United Nations (World Health Organization 2014), Annex 19; <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs348/en/> (accessed October 15, 2015).

¹¹⁰ <http://theconversation.com/why-too-many-mothers-are-still-dying-at-childbirth-in-west-africa-42574> (accessed October 15, 2015).

children. Though economically poor, the poverty that they experience is not reducible to a lack of resources. As the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports, “Poverty ... can also mean the denial of opportunities and choices most basic to human development to lead a long, healthy, creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and the respect of others.”¹¹¹

Writing about poverty in Africa, Barbara Bailey expands the position of UNDP: “Poverty is defined not so much in terms of material deprivation but more in terms of social exclusion and human degradation.”¹¹² Examples abound of social exclusion and human degradation of women on the continent. As I have indicated above and I argue throughout this thesis, such exclusion and degradation are closely linked to the tragedy of maternal mortality in Africa; it shows the nexus of culture, religion, motherhood, and poverty. The women who are most likely to die in childbirth are those who have limited economic resources and access to adequate and safe medical facilities. These facts will be further explored and clarified in the next chapter when I examine the narrative of Toyin Saraki and Tina Beattie’s notion of vulnerability as it relates to the maternal body and the infant body.

To reiterate the point made above about maternal death, while the economic realities press heavily on poor African women, perhaps more telling are the profound health challenges they face due to religious and cultural assumptions and practices. Bearing many children in a situation in which a woman is considered a man’s property, these women face daily indignities and physical and psychological assaults on their persons; they also face a very high risk of maternal death. Deprived of opportunities for education and saddled with daily responsibilities for their children and husbands, they can hardly discern or perceive any hope for the future. In addition, they often live in countries in which their aspirations are limited.¹¹³ Many poor women scrounge for ways to earn a living by working for others just to survive and to assist their families in

¹¹¹ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report, 1997* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

¹¹² See Bailey, “Feminization of Poverty across Pan-African Societies,” 50.

¹¹³ UNDP, *Human Development Report, 1997*, x.

improving their lives.¹¹⁴ Ironically, their search for means of livelihood often further exposes them to physical, social, and psychological hazards such as HIV/AIDS.

Thus, maternal death is a common reality that women face in countries that experience severe poverty. Furthermore, “the politics of migration, the new face of prostitution, and the increased rate of HIV/AIDS infection among women exacerbate this situation.”¹¹⁵ This is a familiar story for many poor African women. As I mentioned in the introductory section of this chapter, Africa has experienced poverty more than any other continent in the world, and the mark of this poverty is etched on the lives of women who bear most of the burden and the deprivation that comes with poverty. As such, “a woman who sits down to rest her tired spin is in a state of sin.”¹¹⁶ This statement perfectly describes the reality of the lives of most poor African women. “A woman has no rest, or time for self-analysis and self-determination. She must work until she is bent and hunchbacked, not for her own sake, but for her children and her husband.”¹¹⁷ The defining role for such women is maternity, and “if she does not do so, then she betrays her nature, sinning against God and against a higher power.”¹¹⁸ Men and their institutions of patriarchy construct these beliefs and foist them on poor women, fusing biological motherhood into their identities and exposing them to maternal mortality.

3. The Community Called Church and Maternal Mortality: Between Rhetoric and Reality

As already noted, Beattie points out the nexus of culture, religion, motherhood, and poverty. In this section, using maternal mortality as an example, I intend to critique the disconnect between rhetoric and the actual situation of African women in the

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Merita Estor, “Women’s Work is Never at an End: Paid and Unpaid Labour,” in *Women, Work and Poverty*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Anne E. Carr (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987), 3.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

theology of the church especially as it relates to the self-understanding of the latter.

Beattie laments the fact that

while papal encyclicals abound with negative references to contraception and abortion and positive references to motherhood, marriage and the family, one can search in vain for any discussion of maternal mortality. Like his predecessors, Pope Francis has a tendency towards romanticism when speaking about motherhood. This is a dangerous fantasy when it occludes the harsh realities and struggles of women's reproductive lives.¹¹⁹

This caution can be applied to ecclesiological models of the church, which is the purpose of this section. To recall Beattie's earlier lament, she continues her argument:

If the pope wants a church that prioritises the needs of the poor, then addressing women's reproductive wellbeing is fundamental to that goal. Maternal mortality is often a direct consequence of poverty. Of an estimated 280,000 maternal deaths a year, 99% occur in the world's poorest countries—mostly in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia. Good obstetric care would prevent most of these deaths, but issues of contraception and abortion raise more contested ethical issues.¹²⁰

Drawing on Beattie's position, the critique of the gap between rhetoric and reality will proceed in two phases. First, against the background of these lacunae and gaps, I will examine the adoption of family as the model of church at the first African synod (1994) and its implications for women considered as wives and mothers. In the second phase, I will undertake a similar critique using *Gaudium et spes* (the pastoral constitution on the church in the modern world). In both instances, I will examine how the theological self-understanding of the church and the concomitant rhetoric intersects with the nexus of religion, motherhood, and poverty.

What do official texts and church documents say about women? Are the contents of those materials compatible with the emerging realization in which women find

¹¹⁹ http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/aug/27/pope-francis-womens-lives-catholic-church?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other (accessed October 15, 2015).

¹²⁰ Ibid.

themselves in light of the Christian message of liberation for all? Does the hierarchy realize that for women, “there is a time for composing and a time for maternal thinking and, on happy days, time for both”?¹²¹ These are some of the questions I pose to the church by examining some key elements of ecclesial rhetoric. The narratives and evidence presented above illustrate and justify Beattie’s use of the expression “dangerous fantasy” because the reality of motherhood so prized in official ecclesial theology constitutes a danger to African women when situated in the context of poverty. There is no scarcity of official documents that attempt to construct the roles and identity of women in tandem with ecclesiological models.

3.1. The Church as Family

In African theology, the preeminent image of the church is “church as family of God.” At face value, this ecclesiological model represents a particular African contribution. Yet deeper analysis shows that it forms part of the mechanism of construction of identity that could silence and oppress women. Nigerian theologian Teresa Okure observes,

The First African Synod adopted the NT and Vatican II’s all-inclusive definition of Church as God’s people by choosing the family as the model of what it means to be Church in Africa. African theologians and theological institutions elaborated copiously on the suitability of family as a paradigm for being Church in Africa. The family in Africa is negatively known to be heavily patriarchal and androcentric, with the husband as the head and boss and the wife and the children as submissive dependents. Positively (and this is where the synod puts its theological and inculturation energy), family in Africa embraces all members on equal terms regardless of personal, social, religious, and other affiliations since one ancestral blood flows in all members and bonds them inseparably.¹²²

Thus, anyone familiar with the African culture be it patrilineal or matrilineal,

¹²¹ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 25.

¹²² Teresa Okure, “Becoming the Church of the New Testament,” in *The Church We Want: Foundations, Theology and Mission of the Church in Africa. Conversations on Ecclesiology*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2015), 110–11.

Christian or African traditionalist, is immediately faced with the reality of a very highly patriarchal and androcentric dynamic of family. In the corresponding family systems, women are subservient and marginalized. Even in some African cultures, the male child has more recognition than his mother and the women in the family. An example is the breaking of the kola nut by the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria. This ritual is performed as a sign of welcome to a guest by an elderly male in the family in whose absence can be represented only by a younger male, not a woman.

This practice of placing man as the head of the woman in the family jibes well with the understanding and practice of ecclesial hierarchy. As Okure further explains, the African model of family is a reenactment of

Genesis 2 as the basis for argument and ‘search for truth’ about collaboration, thus skewing the focus to *male* as a given existing norm. The female human, then, is created solely as God’s recognition of Adam’s need for a “helpmate” ... so that Adam’s life does not sink into a sterile and ... baneful encounter with himself.¹²³

In this arrangement, woman equals wife and man is simply to be made whole by the “giving” actions of his helpmate ... male seems to be a norm in need of support—or even, dare I say, improvement?¹²⁴

This pattern is replicated in Africa and accounts for why women, especially poor women, bear the yoke and burden of the family in Africa. They are stripped of all that is life because they are women, wives, and mothers. All other possibilities of flourishing are either eliminated or seriously constrained. According to Ruddick, this is inherently unjust.

Even though people’s behavior is limited by the disciplines they engage in, no one need be limited to a single discipline. No person because she is a woman, no woman or man because they are mothers, should be denied any intellectual activities that attract them. A scientist cannot disregard evidence for the sake of beauty, but she may care differently at different

¹²³ Verena Wright, *Maid in God’s Image: In Search of the Unruly Woman* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2008), 36.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

times about both.¹²⁵

The messiness and dysfunctionalities associated with the image of family has yet to be explored in the African church's self-understanding as family. The family in Africa is multidimensional: extended families of grandmothers taking care of their orphaned grandchildren, young girls who live with their parents raising their own kids with no responsible man in sight, single mothers living by themselves and raising their kids with men friends who could abuse and molest them and their children, children accused of witchcraft and thrown out to live with distant relatives who in turn abuse and subject them to inhumane situations, and gay or lesbian couples raising children of relatives or their adopted kids.

The concept of family is more complex and not as neat an image as the one portrayed by the African synod. This raises questions about the adequacy of this model from a woman's perspective. Does it give adequate scope for exploring the complexity and diversity of those who make up the community and the structures that organize it? More important, especially as it relates to women,

does it hamper communication and understanding about the role of Christians sharing in the priesthood of baptism? There is, after all, distortion and imbalance in a church family that has marginalized and at times demonized the voices of women. On the other hand, if it does have value as analogy, how useful are insights from family systems theory on such issues as dysfunction, disablement and co-dependency in exploring the good health of church mechanisms and structures?¹²⁶

This realization calls for caution in the understanding and application of the model of church as family.

If we value the African family and highlight what best characterizes it, we must not forget that it carries with it due to ancestral customs some elements contrary to the development of the individual. The family is not in itself an ideal model as described by some writers of the last century. We must deplore some practices that are hardly disappearing, including polygamy, the early and forced marriages of teenage girls, widowhood

¹²⁵ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 25.

¹²⁶ Wright, *Maid in God's Image*, 47–48.

rite, the sharing of inheritances. These are all customs that do not deserve to be retained because they do not respect the dignity of women; rather, they foster inequality between men and women to the detriment of women. Then there is the discriminatory practice that favours boys and keep girls at home under the pretext of helping their mothers at the expense of their education and thus their potential for future economic, social, and political empowerment.¹²⁷

Being an African woman, I find it hard not to recoil at the image of church as family adopted by the African synod precisely because, as demonstrated above, a particular conception of family shaped by practices and assumptions based on culture and religion produces an oppressive image of family in relation to the church in Africa. In some ways, the family system in Africa represents an oppressive structure for women. As an African woman, I understand the concept of family from a very oppressive perspective.

Having reviewed the focus of the African synod on family, I consider the words of this church document to be pure rhetoric when juxtaposed with the real experiences of African women as narrated above.

Taking place fourteen years after the first African synod, the second African synod of 2009 produced another rhetoric addressed to women:

The Synod has a special word for you, Catholic women. You are often the backbone of the local Church ... The specific contribution of women, not only in the home as wife and mother but also in the social sphere should be more generally acknowledged and promoted.¹²⁸

Positive as this rhetoric may sound, it is yet more evidence of the construction of the roles and identity of African women without acknowledging that being “wife and mother” carries mortal risks for the vast majority of poor African women. On the evidence of the women invited as auditors, that is, without the right to vote, there are

¹²⁷ Aloyse-Raymond Ndiaye, “Church as Family or Family as Church?,” in Orobator, *The Church We Want*, 160–61.

¹²⁸

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20091023_message-synod_en.html (accessed October 3, 2015).

significant lessons for the church to learn from women and the situation of women in the church.

A number of religious sisters were invited to address the synod. One of those who spoke was Sr. Felicia Harry, superior general of the OLA. She stressed that collaboration between men and women in the church does not mean men make the decisions while women do the work; it means that women are involved also in the decision-making process. She drew enthusiastic applause when she asked the bishops to do an exercise of Ignatian imaginative contemplation and picture what the African church would be like without women. A Zambian sister, Mary Ann Katiti, provincial superior of the Kasisi sisters, stated that “women have no real voice when it comes to their places and rights, and their contribution to evangelisation.” An intervention by a Congolese sister highlighted the fact that women in Africa bear a disproportionate share of the burden arising from the various crises affecting Africa today—from poverty, disease, and violence to social disintegration.¹²⁹

It would seem that the synod responded to these pleas from the women auditors. The final message of the synod recommends that the local churches in Africa “put in place concrete structures to ensure real participation of women at appropriate levels.” Quite significantly, Proposition 47 of the synod pledges “greater integration of women into Church structures and the decision making process.”¹³⁰ The question remains whether this pledge would be redeemed in a bold and concrete commitment to change.¹³¹ While the rhetoric is stirring, it is contradicted by the reality of women’s lives, especially poor African women, who experience silence and oppression in the context of family and in roles circumscribed by a closed understanding of motherhood.

¹²⁹ Michael McCabe, “The Second African Synod: Major Emphases and Challenges,” http://www.missilogia.org.br/cms/UserFiles/cms_artigos_pdf_73.pdf (accessed October 2, 2015).

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http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20091023_message-synod_en.html (accessed October 3, 2015).

¹³¹ McCabe, “The Second African Synod: Major Emphases and Challenges.”

Besides the documents of the African synods, other important official documents have enunciated the dignity and freedom of human persons especially as a context for setting forth the church's developing social doctrine, but even here, the gap between rhetoric and reality is evident. This is where I turn to *Gaudium et spes*.

3.2. Of the Joys, Hopes, Grievs, and Anxieties of Women

One of the most important documents on the church to have come out of Vatican II is *Gaudium et spes* (GS); I intend to explore its language relative to the situation of African women who experience poverty and maternal mortality. The main questions to be addressed are:

- ☐ What is the situation of women relative to the “joys and hopes” GS refers to?
- ☐ Are the harsh realities of women's lives unavoidable and those involved expendable?
- ☐ Considering that poverty is one of the harshest realities confronting women, do the implications of this reality offer the church a fresh set of ethical lenses for reflection?
- ☐ Is there a gender quotient in how poverty is ethically understood and how it concretely affects the lives of women?
- ☐ How has this contributed to the ideological constraints imposed by ecclesiastical/hierarchical leadership, cultural biases, unconscious assumptions, and entrenched ritual traditions in Africa that reinforce and exacerbate the condition of women outlined in the preceding sections?

To set the context and introduce this analysis, I consider two previous documents briefly. In his widely acclaimed encyclical *Pacem in terris*, on establishing universal peace in truth, justice, charity, and liberty, Pope John XXIII states the basic premise in terms of what is intrinsic to human personhood:

Any human society, if it is to be well-ordered and productive, must lay down as a foundation this principle, namely, that every human being is a person, that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because he is a person he has rights and obligations

flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature. And as these rights and obligations are universal and inviolable so they cannot in any way be surrendered (no. 41).¹³²

How does this powerful affirmation of the rights and dignity of the human person translate into a positive perception of and relationship to women? If the hierarchy truly considers women as persons with full intelligence and free will, one could reasonably expect that women would be occupying important positions in the church and involved in decision-making processes. Furthermore, women will be accorded the freedom and room to aspire for leadership at all levels of church life and ministry without any restrictions or sanctions.

In *Populorum progressio*, Pope Paul VI develops a similar rhetoric on the intrinsic rights and dignity of the human person:

In the design of God, every man is called upon to develop and fulfill himself, for every life is a vocation. At birth everyone is granted, in germ, a set of aptitudes and qualities for him to bring to fruition. Their coming to maturity, which will be the result of education received from the environment and personal efforts, will allow each man to direct himself toward the destiny intended for him by his Creator. Endowed with intelligence and freedom, he is responsible for his fulfillment as he is for his salvation. He is aided, or sometimes impeded, by those who educate him and those with whom he lives, but each one remains, whatever be these influences affecting him, the principal agent of his own success or failure. By the unaided effort of his own intelligence and his will, each man can grow in humanity, can enhance his personal worth, can become more a person (no. 15).¹³³

As usual, this strong rhetoric is framed in gender-exclusive and gender-insensitive terms, suggesting that the focus is on men. The words seem pregnant with meaning for life, yet in practice, they represent a denial of life and dignity for women, who are subsumed under a generic male category. In this sense, such constructions are excessively anthropomorphic and inherently androcentric that create, in Beattie's terms, "dangerous

¹³² www.vatican.va (accessed October 15, 2015).

¹³³ http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html (accessed October 4, 2015).

fantasy.”

It is important to set GS in a historical context. As it relates to women, it is equally important to recall that it was written over fifty years ago. Since that time, many dramatic changes have taken place in the world. As George Weigel and Robert Royal point out, this document has a dual identity: it is “doctrinal, in the sense that it was built on fundamental dogmatic principles; and pastoral, because it attempted to apply those principles to the circumstances of the contemporary world.”¹³⁴ Practically speaking, the duality of this document also captures the duality of women’s experience because it speaks about “joys and hopes” and “griefs and anxieties.” Though these are predicated of “the men of this age,” this archaic language belies the council fathers’ knowledge and awareness of the experiences of women, that is, their “joys and hopes” and their “griefs and anxieties.”

As Ivy Helman has noted in her study of GS, “Women as a group are addressed in paragraphs 8, 9, 12, 27, 29, 52, 60 and 67.”¹³⁵ Paragraph 8 refers to the fact that “discord ... or ... difficulties ... [can result from] new social relationships between men and women.” Surely, these dynamics can create tensions in daily relationships and can profoundly affect marriages. In paragraph 9, the document reads, “Where they have not yet won it, women claim for themselves an equity with men before the law and in fact.” The council fathers did notice that women were raising their voices to claim their place at the world table. In paragraph 12, woman is mentioned as a helpmate to man, and in paragraph 27, women are mentioned as objects—the selling of women and children as something to be avoided. In paragraph 29, the document takes note that “fundamental human rights are still not being universally honored.” The text continues, “Such is the case of a woman who is denied the right to choose a husband freely, to embrace a state of life or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men.”

¹³⁴ George Weigel and Robert Royal, *Building the Free Society: Democracy, Capitalism, and Catholic Social Teaching* (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Washington, DC: Eerdmans, Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1993), 90.

¹³⁵ Ivy A Helman, *Women and the Vatican: An Exploration of Official Documents* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 24.

This is indeed a new element in the document, namely, the recognition that “the basic equality of all must receive ... greater recognition.” As though to stress this aspect with even greater firmness, in paragraph 29, the council fathers state,

Nevertheless with respect to the fundamental rights of the person every type of discrimination whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God’s intent. For in truth it must still be regretted that fundamental personal rights are still not being universally honored.

In paragraph 52, women are mentioned in their roles as mothers and how this role must be protected, “though the legitimate social progress of women should not be underrated on that account”; at least there is an attempt at offering a caveat regarding women’s “social progress.” Notwithstanding, this construction of women’s roles and identity is an outsider’s perspective. Thus, as Ruddick points out,

It might be argued that it is not possible to evaluate maternal thinking without practicing maternal work or living closely and sympathetically with those who do ... to many outsiders, contemporary physics, Christian theology, and theories of nuclear defense abound in contradictions ... and their weight measured not by the outside observer but by practitioners reflecting on their shared aims.¹³⁶

One implication of Ruddick’s position is that women, not men, should be defining women’s roles and constructing their identity. This is a lesson the African church has yet to learn.

In paragraph 60, women are once again mentioned: “Women now work in all spheres. It is fitting that they are able to assume their proper role in accordance with their own nature.” Until this paragraph, much of what the council fathers say about women and the social status bears a tinge of hopeful improvement, but old habits die hard. They quickly revert to a default gender-exclusive mode and speak about women and “their own nature.” There is a consistent attempt on the part of men in the church to consign women to “their own nature” as though this were something fundamentally different from the nature of a human being. Obviously,

¹³⁶ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 25–26.

We cannot at will transcend a gender division of labor that has shaped our minds and lives. Although men can be mothers, and although many women now refuse maternal work and any more would do so if they could without penalty, in most cultures the womanly and the maternal are conceptually and politically linked.¹³⁷

In line with my thesis, the church is not an exception on this issue.

And finally, women are mentioned along with men in paragraph 67 in regard to fair and humane working conditions. One of the most disturbing aspects of this document is that women simply are not regarded as the other half of the human race, as equal partners; they seem to be perceived as a dependent category. Regarding women as a “bunch” is a practice that has survived through the centuries in official papal and magisterial documents. The reference to “man” throughout the document is particularly exasperating in the light of today’s consciousness of sexist language but more so considering the recalcitrance of ecclesiastical authorities who insist on this linguistic form of gender discrimination to bolster their apologies for the privileges of patriarchy. I concur with Judith Dwyer that this approach “does not offer an internal criticism of the church’s own structures and ways in which the institutional church might not affirm the full personhood of women.”¹³⁸

Not only are women’s identities subsumed under authoritarian masculine categories, also, “God is referred to as ‘father’ most consistently, defining divine reality in masculine terms.”¹³⁹ Dwyer is unequivocal in her characterization of the damage this form of speech can do:

It requires a good deal of empathy and no small amount of moral imagination to appreciate the harm that is done so subtly to the psyches of males and females alike when the very structures of speech imply that one form of human being sufficiently encompasses all that is essential to humanity.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Ibid., 41.

¹³⁸ Judith A. Dwyer, *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 414.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Judith A. Dwyer, *Questions of Special Urgency: The Church in the Modern World*

Then as at now, the council fathers and the magisterium do not know—perhaps cannot know without listening to the voices of women—just what the joys and hopes of women are much less the grief and anxieties of poor women who continue to be subjected to death sentence through childbearing.

Despite the protestations of the church's timeless duty to scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them "in the light of the Gospel" (no. 4), the harsh reality of Vatican II was the fact that women had no meaningful and effective voice in the proceedings. Only a handful of women were invited. "The only speech by a female, economist Barbara Ward, had to be read by a man. Even the wives of reporters covering the event were not allowed to approach the altar for communion during daily Mass."¹⁴¹ I perceive here yet another form of impoverishment of women wherein women's capabilities are suppressed, their talents rendered invisible, and their voices muted and silenced or worse, impersonated by men. The result portrays women as unimportant beings relegated to the shadowy fringes of ecclesial and social existence. How are women's joys and hopes expressed when even topics that concern women's bodies are hijacked by men's opinions? The inability of women to be part of the decision making that affects their own very lives, especially issues of maternal well-being, is indeed a pronouncement of the death sentence on the poor women of Africa.

GS states, "The council brings to mankind light kindled from the Gospel, and puts at its disposal those saving resources which the Church herself, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, receives from her Founder" (no. 3). It begs the questions, what light does an oppressive and patriarchal church bring to women? How could the gifts of the other half of the human community gone largely unnoticed and unrecognized in the church? In light of the narratives and voices of women presented in this chapter and in the rest of this thesis, I take the position that the church hardly perceives or interprets the "signs of the times" when it comes to hearing the voices of women "and the griefs and the anxieties of

Two Decades after Vatican II (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1986), 65.

¹⁴¹ <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/lifestyle/55065679-80/church-says-council-women.html.csp> (accessed October 22, 2015).

the [wo]men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted.” This is to say nothing of the blindness that exists when it comes to women speaking about their own bodies, their pregnancies, the physical toll that babies have on their bodies, their horror at the experience of rape, and their vulnerability in response to sex on demand.

Consequently, unsurprisingly, Oduyoye draws the striking conclusion,

I believe that the experience of women in the church in Africa contradicts the Christian claim to promote the worth (equal value) of every person. Rather, it shows how Christianity reinforces the cultural conditioning of compliance and submission and leads to the depersonalization of women.¹⁴²

In this age of globalization and economic growth, many African women are continually “tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy.”¹⁴³ Many poor African women find themselves in this situation; they struggle to overcome the societal myth that pulls them down as they seek to express themselves as freely as do other women and their male counterparts. The insensitivity of the church dashes the joys and hopes of women when the magisterium and the hierarchy fail to acknowledge the truth of their own proclamation, “The destiny of the human community has become all of a piece, where once the various groups of men had a kind of private history of their own.”¹⁴⁴ The world is not just “men” representing groups of nations; the world has always comprised women as well—thinking, creative women who help direct the human enterprise and strive toward the completion of God’s purpose for humanity.

It is possible to extend this argument to the status of women in the church vis-à-vis leadership. The limited positions of leadership in the church assigned to women are testimony of the church’s failure to listen to the signs of the times in relation to women’s claims for equality and dignity. Yet being so deprived and impoverished, women especially yearn for “a deeper and more widespread longing ... a full and free life worthy of ... [all]; one in which they can subject to their own welfare all that the modern world

¹⁴² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 72.

¹⁴³ *Gaudium et Spes* no. 4.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 5.

can offer them so abundantly.”¹⁴⁵ Unfortunately, women have not been given the opportunities to fully express themselves and their desire for fullness of life in regard to their God-given gifts. Women’s light has been darkened in the church. GS asserts,

The Church certainly understands these problems. Endowed with light from God, she can offer solutions to them, so that man’s true situation can be portrayed and his defects explained, while at the same time his dignity and destiny are justly acknowledged.¹⁴⁶

What is particularly noticeable in light of my argumentation in this chapter is the conspiracy between religion and culture to attribute these so-called defects to women.

A corollary of the foregoing is the phenomenon of the hijacking of theological discourse by men. I have already mentioned the impersonation of women’s voices by men. GS recognizes, “The root reason for human dignity lies in man’s call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of his origin man is already invited to converse with God.”¹⁴⁷ Women have often not been free to converse and be in communion with God on their own terms. In the church, men have controlled and directed women’s spirituality. A critical reading of GS shows clearly that apart from being subsumed under an overarching male canopy, women are an afterthought just as they are when it comes to the spiritual life of the church: the sacraments are clergy dominated; the Eucharist is celebrated by a male cleric. In the end, women are free to attend Mass and be present at the sacraments, but the liturgical life and concerns are dominated by the male hierarchy—priests and deacons.

After half a century and more of independence from colonial rule, the people of Africa and especially women have continued to experience oppression. The document says, “There is a growing awareness of the exalted dignity proper to the human person, since he stands above all things, and his rights and duties are universal and inviolable,”¹⁴⁸ but this has hardly applied to women in Africa. Many poor African women have been

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., no. 9.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., no. 12.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., no. 19.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., no. 26.

reduced to the lowest tier of humanity and so tainted with pain and misery that the stirring declamation of GS about the universal right to the conditions of just and humane living rings hollow:

There must be made available to all [wo]men everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one's own conscience, to protection of privacy and rightful freedom even in matters religious.¹⁴⁹

Whether in regard to their reproductive rights or how they are perceived as wives and mothers, ample evidence exists that many African women still do not have access to their most basic needs. Women especially lack the freedom “to embrace a state of life” freely.¹⁵⁰ As argued consistently in this chapter, the alarming number of women affected by maternal mortality is a vivid example of this situation that in itself challenges the rhetoric of this and similar church documents.

Though “the council lays stress on reverence for man” and that “everyone must consider his every neighbor without exception as another self, taking into account first of all his life and the means necessary to living it with dignity,”¹⁵¹ the church itself has failed to realize that over the years, many poor women are not able to attain their highest potential as human persons because of men's oppression and demeaning of women. Joys and hopes are missing if women cannot exercise their own freedom and command respect from men. It is reassuring that the council rejects

whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., no. 29.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

and others of their like are infamous indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are supreme dishonor to the Creator.¹⁵²

Such declarations can have only limited impact in the absence of any serious attempt to probe and critique the causes of these atrocities especially in relation to women's lives. Most if not all are situations caused and created because of the way gender is constructed and particularly when women are seen as useful "by nature" primarily for cooking and cleaning, bearing and caring for children, keeping the home in shape, cleaning the church, preparing church celebrations, taking care of the rectory ... There is hardly joy and hope for women who labor under these conditions of servitude.

For GS, "Since all men possess a rational soul and are created in God's likeness, since they have the same nature and origin, have been redeemed by Christ and enjoy the same divine calling and destiny, the basic equality of all must receive increasingly greater recognition."¹⁵³ While this rhetoric sounds exciting and revolutionary, its application is partial and gender biased. The notion of "basic equality of all" falls apart in situations in which women are relegated to the margins of irrelevance in church and society especially when it comes to exercising authority, actively participating in decision making, and assuming ministerial functions in the church.

In principle, GS strongly upholds the fundamental tenets of the equality and dignity of the human person: "With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent."¹⁵⁴ However, fifty years later, little of this thinking has been put into practice especially as it concerns African women. In agreement with Susan Ross, I contend that one of the greatest stumbling blocks to the actualization of this thinking lies in the ambiguity and ambivalence of magisterial teachings on women's status, identity, and roles in the church. Ross's insightful remarks about the evolution and practice of the politics of language and its insidious effects on women bears repeating in full:

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

If we move to John Paul II's *Mulieris Dignitatem*, issued fifty-eight years later, we do find a much stronger affirmation of women's equality, but there is still, I argue, an understanding of women's 'distinctiveness' that precludes leadership in the church and that continues to emphasize the maternal and 'responsive' character of womanhood. The language of subordination is no longer used, but the language of responsiveness is introduced, in which the divine (and the male) initiative is always first. This is, I think, very much in continuity with what the church has taught about women throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. John Paul II's theology is much more developed, particularly with regard to the 'spousal' character of humanity and especially of women, but it does not substantially change what it has inherited from the past.¹⁵⁵

The inability of African women to claim their own rights and dignity points out the consequences of the multiple discriminations that they encounter daily and the linguistic, religious, and cultural tools used to camouflage and exacerbate discrimination.

The beginning of GS declares,

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.

Women's narratives seek to alter the illusion of joy and hope especially in relation to their experience. After having worked with this document, I perceive clearly that women freely embrace the "griefs and anxieties ... of this age ... especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted." But the women of Africa do in fact experience "joys and hopes" in spite of cultural, religious, ecclesial, and social barriers. The space for joy and hope in the church and society particularly in Africa remains constricted, albeit there are examples—few and far between but no less real—of African women breaking down the walls of this narrow space and making room for the Spirit to breathe joy and hope into the wilting bones of discrimination, oppression, and marginalization. Jesus Christ's presence gives strength and courage to the African women who embrace him. Both for women and men who are members of the Catholic Church, Jesus is "healer," "mediator,"

¹⁵⁵ Susan Ross, "Joys and Hopes, Griefs and Anxieties: Catholic Women Since Vatican II," *NTR* 25, no. 2 (March 2013): 31.

“ancestor,” “loved one,” and “leader.”¹⁵⁶ Especially for women, this sense of the presence of Jesus Christ is indeed a wellspring of joy and hope.

There is a clear mixture of the “joys and hopes” regarding “exciting new opportunities” for women and the “griefs and anxieties” of their “bitter disappointments and closed doors.”¹⁵⁷ Ross captures the complex interplay between the progress of women’s joys and hopes and the persistence of their griefs and anxieties in the church since Vatican II by applying the dual category of “accidents” and “substance”:

The “accidents” of magisterial Roman Catholic theology of womanhood has changed during this time but the “substance” has remained largely the same ... [W]omanhood is still largely understood in maternal and subordinate terms, despite Vatican claims to affirming women’s full equality.¹⁵⁸

Women know and live this enervating dilemma in the being and body. This is particularly true in the African societies, where womanhood is synonymous with motherhood.

Conclusion

My principal aims in this first chapter have been to analyze the process of religious, cultural, and social construction and dehumanization of women, their identities as wives and mothers, and the association of their identities with purely biological functions. I have explored the consequences of this negative construction for the vast numbers of poor African women who are materially and socially impoverished. I have presented some evidence of the impact that maternal mortality has had on African society in general and the absence of its consideration in Catholic theology.

By examining some church documents, I embarked on a critical conversation on gender with particular emphasis on doctrinal and ideological constraints imposed by ecclesiastical/hierarchical leadership, cultural biases, unconscious assumptions, and

¹⁵⁶ Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 21.

¹⁵⁷ Ross, “Joys and Hopes,” 30.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

entrenched, ritual traditions in Africa that reinforce and exacerbate this situation. This is in keeping with the methodology adopted for this study, namely, the use of narratives and stories of people who have had firsthand experience of these issues. Storytelling is second nature for many African women, so I presented in this chapter some initial narratives and reflections on the women themselves.

Joseph Healey offers a quote that expresses the resiliency and determination of African women in the face of overwhelming factors that militate against their quest for the recognition of their humanity in their cultures and in their church: “If you can talk, you can sing. If you can walk, you can dance.”¹⁵⁹ Healey comments, “Despite the stark hardships that often accompany daily life, African people show remarkable resiliency and an ability to celebrate life.”¹⁶⁰ As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, African women know this experience firsthand.

¹⁵⁹ A Shona proverb from Zimbabwe quoted in Joseph G. Healey, *Once Upon a Time in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 85.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

Chapter 2

Smiling with Our Own Teeth and Telling Our Own Stories: Redeeming and Redemptive Motherhood

Introduction

In the preceding chapter, I demonstrated instances and mechanism used in church and society by religion and culture to silence women's voices and even substitute their voices with others. We saw that all the instances amounted to a form of oppression that demeans the dignity of women, especially poor women, as human beings. The nexus of religion, motherhood, and poverty provided the context for the critical analysis of the condition of many women in Africa whose identities are defined by the twin experience of wife and mother and exposed to the risk of death of account of both roles. The unqualified emphasis on biological motherhood perpetuates a situation of subservience to patriarchal domination and cultural exclusion.

This chapter continues the analysis by focusing on the "word" pronounced by women on themselves in regard to their social, cultural, and religious contexts and the mechanisms of exclusion that would silence, distort, or marginalize this word. Literature provides an interesting example of the struggle between the silencing and voicing of many women in Africa depending on their condition and circumstance. The areas to be examined or tasks to be undertaken include the following.

I will explore the inventory of resources generated by women for examining the assumptions, biases, and traditions surfaced in the preceding chapter in view of generating new paradigms and narratives. Also, in light of the preceding chapter, I will examine the literature generated by African women theologians across denominational affiliations and allegiances including African women in dialogue with the world church. Both inventory and literature coalesce around narratives and experiences of women I will illustrate concretely with the challenges of maternal well-being and maternal mortality.

In keeping with the methodology of this thesis, I will draw freely on personal narratives that illustrate the points at issue. Particular questions include,

- What are African women writing and saying about themselves?

- What aspects of their experience are they focusing on as more important?
- What is unique in their writing that leads to a new understanding of gender relationship and justice in church and society?
- How can this be interpreted and developed in the context of maternal well-being?
- How is what they say or how they perceive themselves different?
- How do they perceive their relationship to and with the church and society from the perspectives of Christology and ecclesiology?
- How are these areas challenged and broadened by their theological contributions?
- How do they read the church's reference to and description of women especially in the church's choice and use of maternal imagery?

As I argued in the previous chapter, theological discourse unfortunately does not raise these questions in ways that reflects the challenges of maternal well-being, maternal mortality, and poverty especially as these affect poor African women. This lacuna silences their voices as well as creates conditions for their oppression. In both instances, this situation poses a challenge to Christian understanding of the human person and the theological discourse around the identity and roles of women in church and society.

1. The Power to Define and Name

The following text from Oduyoye provides a fitting point of departure.

As the storm catches us up and spins us about we watch carefully, we feel the movements about us, and we remember, always, what we are about. We seek to retain what is the heart of our African woman-beingness: that we be life loving. May we have joy as we learn to define ourselves, our world, our home, our journey. May we do so telling our own stories and singing our own songs, Enjoying them as they are or for what they may become. Weaving the new patterns we want to wear, we continue to tell our tales of the genesis of our participation. We gather the whole household and begin a new tale. *Nse se nse se o! Nse se so awo.*¹⁶¹

Oduyoye captures the aspirations embedded in the hearts of many African women when she speaks of defining “ourselves, our world, our home, our journey.” We do this

¹⁶¹ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 217.

by “telling our own stories” and “weaving new patterns.”¹⁶² Many African women have been oppressed in multiple ways; their quest to find themselves in the midst of entrenched stereotypical and gender-biased portraits poses multiple challenges. The question is, Who am I as woman, defining self and not being simply defined?

There is an awareness in our society of whom we think or imagine African women to be. The ensuing images as portrayed by the media and supported by some African male protagonists form a distorted collage of womanhood and motherhood. It is no surprise that male voices claiming to be the representation of Africa routinely portray African women in the most subservient way. We can adduce many examples of this attitude and behavior.

A first example is the pattern of portrayal of women by men in some cultures and societies that prioritize patriarchy. A recent apt illustration is the response of President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria to his wife’s strong criticism of the failings and inefficiencies of his administration. His words uttered on a public, global forum paint a picture of subservience, oppression, and subordination. Not only did the president claim “superior knowledge over her,” he also declared, “I don’t know which party my wife belongs to, she belongs to my kitchen and my living room and the other room.”¹⁶³ If this pronouncement from a powerful political figure could be dismissed as a misguided specimen of an androcentric mind-set, there is nonetheless no dearth of attempts to define the role and identity of women in the church.

A second example is contained in the following excerpt from John Paul II’s “Letter to Women,” to which I have already referred in chapter 1.

Thank you, women who are *mothers*! You have sheltered human beings within yourselves in a unique experience of joy and travail. This experience makes you become God’s own smile upon the newborn child, the one who guides your child’s first steps, who helps it to grow and who is the anchor as the child makes its way along the journey of life. Thank you, women who are *wives*! You irrevocably join your future to that of your husbands in a relationship of mutual giving at the service of love and life. Thank you, women who are *daughters* and women who are *sisters*! Into the heart of the family, and then of all society, you bring the richness

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-37659863> (accessed October 24, 2016).

of your sensitivity, your intuitiveness, your generosity and fidelity.¹⁶⁴

The italicized words form a litany of perceptions and portray women in the imagination of men in the church. In such contexts, women do not speak for themselves much less define their own identity. As we saw in chapter 1, if the writers of *Gaudium et spes* had sufficiently heeded the voices of women (though a few women were part of the drafters of the document), they probably would have added a clause to the effect that the joys and hopes of women have been misrepresented and obstructed by men and their institutions of power, privilege, and patriarchy. If women had told their stories in their own voices, the final document would have represented the reality of their lives more justly and accurately.

A final example of contributing factors to the diminishment of women's dignity is the media in which, for various ends, women are objectified and sexualized. The ensuing images are often derogatory and demeaning of women and their dignity.

For centuries, many women have been nameless thereby carrying the pain of feeling inadequate, unrecognized, and unappreciated just by their gender—as women but not without a clear definition of their role and status. In this regard, Oduyoye notes,

African society expects childbearing and homemaking of its women. This is one generalization that can safely be made. It is also more or less a truism that this is usually accepted by African women ... Yet women and their work as mothers and homemakers have often been bypassed, as if women did nothing beyond producing and raising offspring. Recently, when some African women have begun to question the limitations of their biological role, men have had ready answers: African women are precious, say the African men, they know their place and keep it. Should an African woman disagree with this assessment, she becomes an imitator of Western women, a model in which Africa has no interest.¹⁶⁵

The central thesis of Oduyoye's position is that many writers of African religion, history, and culture cannot fathom the complex reality of the identity and experience of African women. Despite this tendency to define and represent the African woman as someone who needs to be saved or rescued and empowered by some benevolent, external

¹⁶⁴ Pope John Paul II, "Letter to Women for Beijing Conference," no. 2 (emphases mine).

¹⁶⁵ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 81.

force, countless African women continue to uphold their dignity and worth in several areas and domains and reclaim their voices:

As women of Africa we came to a realization that our own liberation partially depends on us. We have broken the silence and we are speaking for ourselves. We must stretch our theological imagination, our reading of the Holy Scriptures to take cognizance of our presence as women of Africa. We discovered that we are heavily attached to our traditions and cultures and that we must name these as subjects of analysis and critique within the field of Theology.¹⁶⁶

Ironically, the public sectors are even more amenable to the gifts and presence of women than the church is, a fact that seems lost on John Paul II in his precipitous attempt above to define women by their biological functions and relationships. An important minority of women in Africa are sharing their gifts as leaders in government, business, and education. A good example is the case in Rwanda, where women have spearheaded the reconstruction of their war-torn country. The statistics show that women are more than half of the leaders in government, and the positive changes are quite obvious.

To come back to the question of representation, the biased representation of African women does not reflect in any way the reality of the women in my life. Minna Salami, a British Nigerian woman, identifies three major stereotypes of an African woman portrayed by the media: the struggler, the survivor, and the empowered African woman. The struggler is the African woman who has been dehumanized by war, famine, and poverty. In the media, she is in perpetual despair and grieving, wailing, and weeping—always needing outsiders to help, rescue, and save her.

The survivor is identical to struggler except that she has survived the struggle. In the media, she usually wears a smile to demonstrate this point even though she is quite aware of the reality of the harsh conditions surrounding her.

Finally is the stereotyped empowered African woman. According to Salami, this category includes basically everybody else: politicians, teachers, professors, artists, bakers, and so on. Her argument is that the African woman is hardly depicted as herself doing mundane things such as relaxing, reading, crafting, and above all, loving and being

¹⁶⁶ www.thecirclecawt.org/profile.html (accessed October 19, 2015).

loved.

Salami's argument provides a powerful backdrop, rationale, and impetus for clarifying how I identify the women who are the focus of and referenced in this research. The aim of this thesis is to bring the voices of the voiceless into the conversation, in this case women, whose maternal well-being has been sidelined while church arguments continue to focus on issues such as abortion and contraception rather than the human person and body who bears the brunt of it all. I am identifying African women whose voices are not being heard and whose humanity and dignity have been undermined through our quick and facile assessment of them in statistics and figures.

I name them as poor but not because they are lazy; they are disempowered, marginalized, and oppressed. My interest is in those women who despite all their challenges continue to struggle to maintain their self-worth. And more important, they are those women who might not make it to their forty-ninth birthdays because they got pregnant too early in life. In essence, these are women whose life challenges put them at risk through forces such as maternal deaths.

According to the World Health Organization,

Maternal mortality remains unacceptably high. About 830 women die from pregnancy or childbirth-related complications around the world every day. By the end of 2015, roughly 303,000 women will have died during and following pregnancy and childbirth. Almost all of these deaths occurred in low-resource settings, and most could have been prevented.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ World Health Organization, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs348/en/> (accessed December 2, 2015). This data is corroborated by several studies: "An estimated 287,000 maternal deaths occurred worldwide in 2010, most of which were in low-income and middle-income countries and were avoidable. Reduction of maternal mortality has long been a global health priority and is a target in the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG) framework and a key concern of the Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health launched by the UN Secretary-General in September, 2010. To reach the target of the fifth MDG, a 75% decrease in maternal mortality ratio (the number of maternal deaths per 100 000 livebirths) between 1990 and 2015 is needed. Some progress towards this target has been reported, especially

As mentioned in the introduction, in this context, this thesis aims to bring the matter that affects poor African women to the fore and challenge the church to wake up to its reality and the responsibility and duty to act according to its gospel mandate. This mandate prioritizes the inclusion of all voices unencumbered by gender or class. The exclusion or silencing of women's voices with regard to maternal well-being amounts to a direct contradiction and violation of this mandate.

Lloyd Brown points out that the exclusion of women is evident in literature, where “the women writers of Africa are the other voices, the unheard voices, rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and the predictably male oriented studies in the field.”¹⁶⁸ This explains why the story and impression created by African men and some androcentric writers do not justify the truth of the identity of African women. According to Brown, the evidence shows, “Relatively few literary magazines and scholarly journals, in the West and in Africa itself, have found significant space or time for African women writers.”¹⁶⁹ In this situation, it is easy for this oversight to metamorphose and harden into a solid tradition that informs belief and action: “The ignoring of women writers on the continent has become a tradition, implicit rather than formally stated, but a tradition nonetheless—and a rather unfortunate one at that.”¹⁷⁰

For African women such as Oduyoye, this experience of excluding women in discourse, in conversations, and in issues that pertain to them is the death of men as well as women. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter and in chapter 4, what Oduyoye and other women theologians advocate is the wholeness of humanity. Contrary to the idea of complementary of two halves—as mentioned in the critique of John Paul II's theology of

in the past decade, but further improvements are needed.” See *The Lancet Global Health* 2, no. 6, e323–e333 (June 2014), <http://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X%2814%2970227-X/fulltext> (accessed March 4, 2016).

¹⁶⁸ Lloyd W. Brown, *Women Writers in Black Africa* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 3.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

the body in chapter 1—the ultimate goal of feminine discourse is the rediscovery and reconciliation of humanity created in the image and likeness of God.

The tendency to uphold half of humanity to the detriment of the other is akin to burying our most important human treasures meant to enhance humanity as a whole. More significantly, it is the death of God in humanity and the inversion of the meaning of incarnation. If human beings created in the image and likeness of God are denied their dignity through oppression and discrimination, such distortion negates the message of the good news of God, who delights in pitching tent among human beings. To correct this distortion of the *imago Dei* in both women and men, theological discourse must transcend the level of a mere defense of doctrine and engage with issue of justice, human rights, and human flourishing. That is why, according to Kenyan theologian Musimbi Kanyoro,

Theological engagement with gender issues seeks to expose harm and injustices that are in society and are extended to scripture and the teachings and practices of the church through culture ... African women are part of the trend whereby women now study theology. African women's theology places emphasis on women's humanity, on the fact that women too are created in the image of God.¹⁷¹

Given this development, it is reasonable to expect that the issues of maternal mortality, well-being, and flourishing will become an imperative for theological discussion and inclusion as a path pioneered by African women.

For women to take up this formidable task of reclaiming themselves and telling their own stories entails multiple levels of meanings, choices, and tasks. It involves having a dream and a vision of what could be and choosing what to keep and what to discard from societal stereotyping of women. It requires becoming assertive and expressing it as women and becoming outraged at seeing what is actually there and how it might differ from expectations at the point of departure. It also means unanticipated painful adjustments and jolting surprises. Finally, it requires courage and flexibility.

¹⁷¹ Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, “Engendered Communal Theology: African Women’s Contribution to Theology in the Twenty-First Century,” in *In Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women’s Theology*, ed. Kwok Pui-lan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 22.

2. Silencing, (M)Othering, and the Struggle of Naming

In her introduction to *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, Obioma Nnaemeka writes,

Feminist notions of agency draw the line between feminist interpretations of the situation of women in African novels and African women's perception of their own situations. For example, while some feminist analyses of the African novel conflate silence (the noun) and silence (the verb), the novels themselves make a distinction between 'to be silenced' and 'to be silent' (the former as imposition and the latter as choice). One exercises agency when one *chooses* not to speak; the refusal to speak is also an act of resistance that signals the unwillingness to participate.¹⁷²

Nnaemeka pinpoints various characters in African novels who though they were often prevented from expressing themselves often turned the tables and took their power back to "regain their agency by choosing to remain silent and thereby gain the attention that initiates talk."¹⁷³ In this instance, I can speak to very personal experience of noticing my mother on several occasions refusing to respond to situations she would not support or accommodate. Her silence would speak volumes, and one would be pressed to engage her further. In this case, "silence can, therefore, mean both a refusal to talk and an invitation for talk."¹⁷⁴

For African women smiling with our own teeth, this does not lead to assimilation so much as it establishes what it means to be independently and uniquely other in a world that tends toward homogeneity. Beattie aptly characterizes the trajectory in the following terms:

Women have moved from silence to speech, from invisibility to presence, from submission to co-responsibility. Silence takes many forms. It can be a fragile gift easily destroyed by the frenetic pace of modern life, or it can

¹⁷² Obioma Nnaemeka, "Introduction: Imag(in)ing knowledge, power, and subversion in the margins," in *The Politics of (M)othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. Obioma Nnaemeka (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

be oppressive and stultifying.¹⁷⁵

This betwixt and between situation faces many African women's experiences as defined by others. I have been in this space as have many of my African sisters. As indicated in the previous chapter, this study is about hearing their voices and hopes and sharing their experiences in view of witnessing the birth of a Christian community and church that honors and includes their gifts and challenges as part of the story of humanity.

Apart from the challenge of being born as a woman in African culture, many African women are faced with burdensome ideologies created and imposed by culture—beliefs that have created barriers rather than pathways to self-fulfillment and realization as a human person. There are so many conflicts between whom they want to be and who or what society names them to be. A critical node of this conflict is “the different perceptions of motherhood ... [M]otherhood as an institution and motherhood as an experience.”¹⁷⁶ The difference between both is significant in the attempt to hear the voices of poor African women and understand how they are named.

Nnaemeka has made a very important observation about the experiences of motherhood in African society:

Feminist arguments of the 1970s and 1980s against motherhood are based on motherhood as institution.¹⁷⁷

Motherhood is dangerous to women because it continues the structure within which females must be women and mothers and, conversely, because it denies to females the creation of a subjectivity and world that is open and free. An active rejection of motherhood entails the development and enactment of a *philosophy of evacuation*. Identification and analysis of the multiple aspects of motherhood not only show what is wrong with motherhood, but also the way out. A philosophy of evacuation proposes women's collective removal of themselves from all forms of motherhood. Freedom is never achieved by the mere inversion of an oppressive

¹⁷⁵ Tina Beattie, “Christmas Meditation (2015),” BBC Radio 4,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06sdvww> (accessed December 26, 2015).

¹⁷⁶ Nnaemeka, “Introduction,” 4.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

construct, that is, by seeing motherhood in a “new” light. Freedom is achieved when an oppressive construct, motherhood, is vacated by its members and thereby rendered null and void.¹⁷⁸

The point at issue is motherhood as an institution, a concept alive and well in African cultures. Varieties of African culture have socialized their members in the totalizing idea of perpetuating life through woman’s reproduction. And as demonstrated in chapter 1, that is reflected in the strong desire of poor and oppressed African women to reproduce to gain social relevance and respect as wives and mothers.

This process of socialization in docility is neither innocuous nor unproblematic. The consequences are devastating for many poor African women. As Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn have observed poignantly,

One of the reasons that so many women and girls are kidnapped, trafficked, raped, and otherwise abused is that they grin and bear it. Stoic docility—in particular, acceptance of any decree by a man—is drilled into girls in much of the world from the time they are babies, and so they often do as they are instructed, even when the instruction is to smile while being raped twenty times a day.¹⁷⁹

However, there are structural and systemic issues as well that cause women to take on and absorb attitudes that harm their image and dignity:

Women themselves absorb and transmit misogynistic values, just as men do. This is not a tidy world of tyrannical men and victimized women, but a messier realm of oppressive social customs adhered to by men and women alike. As we said, laws can help, but the greatest challenge is to change these ways of thinking. And perhaps the very best means of combating suffocating traditions is education.¹⁸⁰

An abundance of evidence confirms this practice of socialization. One particularly recent distressing narrative comes from Malawi, where in some cultures, men are paid to have sex with girls as young as ten ostensibly as part of a preadolescent sexual initiation rite. Natasha Annie Tonthola was subjected to the ritual. In her story, she explains how

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, 47.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 69.

her harrowing experience of the ritual helped inspired her to launch a campaign for the protection of women and girls:

We were told that we were going to learn about womanhood, and to be honest I was excited. So was every other girl. On the last day one of the female elders told us that we had reached the final part of the process. She said a hyena was coming to visit us. “Don’t worry, I’m not talking about an animal,” she said. “I’m talking about a man.” But we didn’t actually know what a hyena is, or what he was going to do. They don’t tell you he’s going to have sex with you. We each had a piece of cloth and we were told to put it on the floor. We were told that it was time to show that we knew how to treat a man, that we knew what to do for our future husbands. Then we were blindfolded. You’re not supposed to show you’re scared, you’re not supposed to show you don’t know what’s happening to you. The man comes, and he tells you to lie down ... and he does what he does ... We were young girls, so we were tense ... I found it painful. When he finished, I was relieved. The female elder came in and said, “Congratulations, you have finished the initiation ceremony, and you are a woman now.” Many girls think this is normal because we are in a way brainwashed, we think it is OK because it is tradition. But the hyena didn’t use protection and some of the girls got pregnant.¹⁸¹

Sadly, unlike Natasha, many of the victims of this ritual bear permanent scars of its negative effects including teenage pregnancy, a predisposing factor of maternal mortality.

The point in this distressing narrative is that the kind of acceptance that Kristof and WuDunn refer to has been made possible by the way women socialize most girls in their communities. This process is anything but natural; it is conscious, intentional, and “man-made.” The logic of socialization subverts thought and perpetuates injustice, oppression, and dehumanization of the greater half of humanity. The result is to settle for a cultural quietism and passive acceptance. As Kristof and WuDunn put it,

There are good practical as well as cultural reasons for women to accept abuse rather than fight and risk being killed. But the reality is that as long as women and girls allow themselves to be prostituted and beaten, the abuse will continue.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-37431005> (accessed October 25, 2016).

¹⁸² Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, 47.

The reverse of this logic of acquiescence is, “There will be less trafficking and less rape if more women stop turning the other cheek and begin slapping back.”¹⁸³

In reality, not only are women silenced, they also become responsible for everything the family requires to survive at their own expense. The fact of being life-givers mutates into a death-dealing experience. Ivone Gebara captures this situation well when she states,

It is well known that in all societies the primary responsibility of feeding the family falls to women. Beginning with the nourishing function of the female body, lactation, culture imposes heavy responsibility upon women—the responsibility of feeding and educating their children and inculcating virtue—but it also oppresses, manipulates, and even destroys them ... Woman’s life seems to be tied to the primary aspect of maintaining life. Consequently the evil of lacking the essentials of life touches them in a special way.¹⁸⁴

Interestingly, with the growing realization of the ills of abusive men in relationships, some African women have opted out and aim just to bear children without necessarily being bound or tied to any relationship with men. Many women actually enjoy the freedom, the joy, and (with all its socioeconomic and cultural) challenges of single-handedly raising their children without the presence of men, who are often added burdens rather than sources of support in the family. Consequently,

African women writers attempt most of the time to delink motherhood and victimhood the way they separate wifedom and motherhood ... although feminist readings of the African texts have a tendency to conflate wifedom pains and motherhood pains.¹⁸⁵

In this regard, some African women know that “the arguments that are made for motherhood in the African texts are based not on motherhood as a patriarchal institution but motherhood as an experience (‘mothering’) with its pains and rewards.”¹⁸⁶ It is like

¹⁸³ Ibid., 53.

¹⁸⁴ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002.), 17–18.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

the extension of the joy that a woman has after having gone through the excruciating pain of labor and holding a new life in her arms with a sense of relief.

Even then, as Beattie eloquently describes it, in this experience of birthing, the presence of death is never far from the theater of life:

Sometimes a birth can be gentle and lovely, as the birth of my daughter was gentle and lovely. But birth is not about flourishing. Birth is that which a mother and child must endure in order to flourish beyond the trauma, but only if we can incorporate the trauma into the living can we hope to flourish. Birth must be reconciled with death, death must yield to a second birth, if we are to flourish ... In the midst of birth we are in death, and every birthing encompasses a dying. To give birth is to make a blood sacrifice, a sacrifice of one's own blood. It is to say, "This is my body, this is my blood, given for you."¹⁸⁷

To further concretize and illustrate the foregoing, in the following two sections, I present two personal examples of mothering and self-naming that affirms the value of motherhood as the empowering and life-giving potential of African women.

2.1. Beyond Socialization

One memorable example of Beattie's poignant words was a picture of a relative of mine who had a baby a couple of years ago in Holland. As are many other women in my family, she is strong and quite independent when it comes to raising children whether or not she is married; she functions without relying on any man.

When she had her baby alone in Holland, the so-called husband, who was actually a polygamist, was in Nigeria with his real wife, his first wife. The strength of my cousin was truly admirable. With two other lovely children under age fourteen, she managed to drive herself to the hospital, endure an eight-hour surgery and a life-threatening postpartum hemorrhage, and give birth to the most adorable baby girl. The picture of her smiling with so much love after recovery as she gazed at her baby beside her was as priceless as the loving look of God, who brings forth life in us after overcoming all the

¹⁸⁷ Tina Beattie, "A Mother is Born: A Reflection in Four Parts," 18–19. I have yet to read an account of birthing and motherhood in all its physical, emotional, biological, ethical, and epistemological complexities as compelling as Beattie's.

pangs of hell. It was the loving look of a mother who knew she would have to raise this child all alone but would do the best she could. It was a loving look of a mother whose main interest was more in her child and about nurturing life rather than in a man whose presence and support she could not count on. As it turned out, the man has never seen the child; she has asked him to go his merry way as he was more of a burden to rather than a source of support for her.

Viewed from a particular perspective, some could argue that the man was simply conforming to the social and cultural expectations of what it means to be a “father” in a patriarchal context reinforced by androcentrism and gender bias. Consequently, in this perspective, it would seem that he too has been socialized albeit negatively to be a “father.”

Ruddick sees a danger in this process of socialization: “Although many men do and many more could take up maternal work, in our present, sexually divided world, there is an ever present danger that male parents will continue to become fathers.”¹⁸⁸

Male parents suffer as well due to their lack of an experience of a life-giving fatherhood. Ruddick’s idea of a just and healthy mothering role and experience for men evokes the need for balance and wholeness in parenting.¹⁸⁹ As she puts it,

Although the myth of Fatherhood may be cruel to women and men, I look forward to the day when anyone who actually takes pleasure and pride in her or his children or has authority over their lives also shares in the work of *caring* for them. It is not just or healthy for women, men, or children if men, as a group, are denied or deny themselves the work and pleasures of mothering.¹⁹⁰

For African women and their female scholars, “motherhood is discussed in

¹⁸⁸ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 44.

¹⁸⁹ Among the many merits of Ruddick’s contribution to feminist studies that I consider important for this study is the fact that her analysis allows a shift away from an essentialist perception of women’s natural ability and capacity for motherhood: women are not the only ones who can be maternal or experience motherhood and provide care. Men, too, can be. However, interesting as it may seem, this idea can be construed as a surreptitious way of validating male control dressed as men’s experience of mothering and motherhood and woefully reminiscent of patriarchal standards.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

relative terms that reflect different personal histories.”¹⁹¹ In weaving their stories, women do not confine their identities solely to being death-defying production machines merely for prolonging men’s names and heritage; rather, they recognize that “identifying women as mothers with a biological function to reproduce is a societal construction of gender that dehumanizes women.”¹⁹² That is why

as it were, the African texts give a human face to motherhood. It is not surprising then that in spite of the pains of motherhood, most mothers in the texts are not prepared to evacuate it ... they know that they are also the beneficiaries of the rewards of mothering.¹⁹³

In this way, a new voice is rising as African women name and identify themselves in ways that escape and transcend the triple stereotypical taxonomy identified above by Salami.

2.2. *Mothering in a Kibera Slum*

Another personal example is my own life and identity as a celibate woman religious who is “mothering” all kinds of people in and outside my family. Being an African woman in the diaspora, a Nigerian-American, I have the benefit and sometimes the challenge of navigating between two cultures I claim as mine. Three years ago, I had the privilege of adopting six girls from St. Aloysius School for HIV/AIDS orphans in the slums of Kibera, in Nairobi, Kenya. The experience fulfilled my long-held desire to birth life for my African sisters. I had become a woman with a relatively higher status in comparison to most women from my continent, and I was beginning to have a deep sense of bursting out that could be described only as the pangs and pain of labor albeit as a celibate religious woman. I have never had the experience of physically birthing a child, but I did have the desire to nurture other women to life.

¹⁹¹ Beattie, “A Mother is Born,” 18–19.

¹⁹² Anne Arabome, “Who is Christ for African Women?” in *Catholic Women Speak: Bringing Our Gifts to the Table*, ed. Catholic Women Speak Network (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015), 25.

¹⁹³ Nnaemeka, “Introduction,” 5.

Over the last couple of years, I have made a modest attempt to journey with these young women by offering a listening ear and a willing shoulder on which they could lay their cares and challenges. I strive to mentor them and instill in them a sense of confidence and hope in their potential to become women of conscience, compassion, and competence. They call me mother obviously not in any biological sense but as a woman who has freely chosen to birth in them positive alternatives to the closed existence imposed on them by the accident of their birth and life in Kibera.

It is in this concrete sense that I concur with Leonardo Mercado's incisive observation, "The role of the theologian is to function as a midwife to the people as they give birth to a theology that is truly rooted in a culture and moment of history."¹⁹⁴

In the experience of Kibera, I knew I had become a woman fulfilled in myself and ready to give back by empowering more women to do the same. My first meeting with my adopted daughters was filled with love in a way I can hardly describe. I said to them, "I am now your mother. I will be there for you as much as humanly possible." Those words lit up their eyes as they sat in circle around this nun who was becoming a mother in a unique way.

The experience described above abounds in the lives of many women in Africa whose mothering gifts flourish in the face of formidable cultural and systemic obstacles and biases. As Nnaemeka has observed, "in some literary texts under study, adoption is indicative of the women's eagerness to 'mother' while rejecting the abuses (physical, sexual, emotional, etc.) of the institution of motherhood under patriarchy."¹⁹⁵ She provides further illustration of characters in African novels.

As mother to four non-biological children, Mira Masi rejects exploitation by men while defining and participating in motherhood as mothering on her own terms (Ibrahim). Renee Larrier notes that though Aoua Keita did not have her own biological children, her choice of career—midwifery—made it possible for motherhood to provide the context for a fruitful professional life for her in the same way it provided Andree Blouin a space for political activism. Tanga asserts her freedom by rejecting motherhood, abandoning prostitution, and embracing

¹⁹⁴ Quoted in Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 18–19.

¹⁹⁵ Nnaemeka, "Introduction," 5.

motherhood as mothering by adopting Mala, a disabled child (Nfah-Abbenyi).¹⁹⁶

In these examples lies a rebuttal to simplistic definitions and stereotypical portrayals of motherhood and womanhood especially by church men who sentimentalize the idea without a clue to the spiritual depth and symbolic meaning of these experiences. Ruddick captures the complexity of the point at issue when she asserts,

As it is with women so it is with mothers. Neither a woman nor a man is born a mother; people become mothers in particular historical and social circumstances. Even if pregnancy and birth are taken as part of mothering, the biological fact of birthgiving is, both medically and symbolically, culturally various.¹⁹⁷

The core lesson, however, remains: no one can smile with another person's teeth.

It is tempting and convenient to bypass the personal narrative and naming of one's experience as often grand narratives about African women are wont to do. This is an ongoing temptation of ecclesiastical and theological discourses that try to define and frame the experience and identities of the other, especially women, under the canopy of their "nature" as women. As Ruddick points out, the personal voice is indispensable:

The peculiarities of my experience affect my fundamental conceptions of maternal thinking and work ... I devised a way of speaking that honors women who give birth as well as adoptive mothers who may be grandmothers, aunts, fathers, or persons biologically unrelated to their children.¹⁹⁸

As an African, I know this fact; it is deeply embedded in our African culture, where there is no limit to mothering, a fact that Ruddick confirms in reference to other indigenous cultures:

But even in my own country, many communities of Native Americans would find my efforts strangely belabored since such a double honoring of birthgiving and adoptive mothering is already richly inscribed in their

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 5–6.

¹⁹⁷ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 54.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

culture.¹⁹⁹

3. Of the Fatherhood and Motherhood of Men

In light of the foregoing discussion, I hypothesize that motherhood delineates a democratic and inclusive space that African women or any woman would not claim to monopolize. Such attitude of inclusiveness allows for the power of self-naming to flourish for men and women alike without creating conflictual dichotomies. In this sense, from the perspective of an African woman, motherhood is liberating for women and men because it is inclusive of women and men as life givers.²⁰⁰

In relation to this argument about the liberating inclusivity of motherhood, Ruddick tells of her own experience of trying to enlighten her son on men as mothers.

When I imagine telling my once adolescent son that he would be a “good mother,” I see the psychological point behind Bell Hook’s remarks. It is essential, as Hooks argues, that mothering be re-visioned as an activity “naturally” undertaken by men, that boys *and* girls see men mothering, that children with male parents are mothered by them.²⁰¹

Ruddick continues her argument in this vein.

Moreover, I want to protest the myth and practice of Fatherhood and at the same time underline the importance of men undertaking maternal work. The linguistically startling premise that men can be mothers makes these points while the plethora of literature celebrating fathers only obscure them ... It is of the first importance, epistemologically and politically, that a work which has historically been feminine can transcend gender. But “transcendence” has not yet been achieved. Despite affections and egalitarian commitment, individual women and men may find it difficult to resist entrenched romantic fantasies and habits of domination and sacrifice.²⁰²

Ruddick is careful to avoid the habitual heavy-handedness ingrained in the portrayal of fatherhood in a manner similar to Peter Hitchcock’s treatment of the “gaze”

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 43.

²⁰² Ibid., 44.

in Nnaemeka's book. Hitchcock's analysis recalls elements of Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of the face. I will defer the analysis of the latter's approach to chapter 5; for now, it suffices to note that having reviewed Egyptian feminist fiction, Hitchcock critiques the tendency to place "too much emphasis on the 'eye of the beholder' rather than the looking of the seen."²⁰³ The problem, as he sees it, is the domination that lurks in the eyes of the gazer. This practiced gaze colludes in the process of "othering" women and degenerates into a method of making an object of "the seen." In the intersubjective relationship of I and thou, the perception of the other can either harden into a gaze and reinforce dominance or emerge as a look that promotes mutuality. While in the former instance, the beholder demeans, reduces, and diminishes the seen, in the latter, the beholder affirms, empowers, and enables the seen.²⁰⁴

Taken together, Ruddick's and Hitchcock's points confirm my thesis that male and female alike have capacities to express and experience maternal care in their relationship with and attitude toward the other in a manner that does not silence, objectify, or oppress the other. It is a movement from dominance to solidarity with the other, the ability to take a long, loving look at the other. This is also expressed by men who have allowed themselves to be touched by the experience of true love of God and neighbor.

Church and society must stop silencing and oppressing women through the construction of roles such as motherhood as womanhood that inhibit them from exercising all their God-given potentials. It is imperative, as African women are demonstrating,

that *many kinds of maternal stories* need to be told: by heterosexual, gay, and lesbian mothers; by mothers who are coupled, single, or live in groups; by mothers separated from their children's female or male biological parent; by mothers who are celibate or monogamous or who have many sexual partners.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Peter Hitchcock, "The Eye of the Other: the gaze and the look in Egyptian feminist fiction," in Nnaemeka, *Womanhood and the Politics of (M)Othering*, 70.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 70–81.

²⁰⁵ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 54 (emphasis mine).

To bring about God's reign and justice in our church and society in regard to the church's precipitous and shallow categorization of women as wives and mothers, we should realize, "It is only by collecting our many stories that we can address the urgent task of rethinking the connection between sexual and mothering lives."²⁰⁶

Several years ago when I was studying at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, I encountered a unique professor I considered very different from others. Something about Professor (now Emeritus) Anthony Gittins left an indelible mark on my heart. Sitting through his lectures was an experience at the crossroads of contemplation and action, compassion and solidarity. Gittins conveyed his presence to his students through a regard or look that honored, acknowledged, and noticed the other's presence with respectful curiosity and affirming response. His examples were mundane and simple but practical and human, drawing from his long missionary experience among the Mende people in Sierra Leone, West Africa; his examples provoked mirth and marvel in equal measure.

At the core of the life of this missionary and religious (a member of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit) was a key that explained his empowering and life-affirming humanity: Gittins was the "father" of "an adopted, multi-ethnic family: a daughter and four grandchildren."²⁰⁷ His fatherhood radiated the liberating motherhood of his personality and identity.

In regard to the experience of Father Gittins, Laurie Brink offers a framework for assessing similar, unique experiences by drawing on her narrative entitled "In praise of the 'good enough' family: The holy family, with its adoptive father-son pairing, can lead the way for today's unconventional families":

I have two mothers: one who gave birth to me, and one who raised me. For nearly half a century, I loved the latter and longed for the former. Then through a strange twist of fate—or more aptly, God's ever-present hand—I recently met my biological mother and sister ... In this day when hyphenations describe family relationships, step-, foster-, and half- often do more to separate us than connect us. I have found, though, that reflecting on Matthew's portrayal of Joseph brings me to a better

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ <http://www.ctu.edu/academics/anthony-gittins-cssp> (accessed December 3, 2015).

understanding of what makes the family “holy.” It has less to do with the accident of biology and much more to do with the choice to love.²⁰⁸

She continues with a direct reference to her colleague’s, Gittins’s, experience of family:

In a footnote, Gittins explains that his own “good enough” family consists of his adopted adult daughter, her three adopted children and one biological child, her common-law husband, and her adopted mother, who is not related by marriage or blood to Gittins. I should also mention Gittins is a priest in good standing within his religious congregation, and his daughter’s adopted mother is a religious sister. Unlike most familial arrangements, this unique one was initiated by the adult daughter, who recognized that she needed parents who could help her negotiate her very complicated and difficult life. This arrangement might not resemble the traditional definition, but as Gittins writes, “It is a ‘good enough family’ in the sense that it struggles, in an explicitly Christian fashion, to address the needs of each of its members and to act justly in the wider world.”²⁰⁹

In concluding her presentation on the Holy Family, Brink asks,

What makes the holy family holy? Some might say the presence of the divine child Jesus. But I think holy is also an attribute of Mary and of Joseph. Both are given—and both accept—the opportunity to be conduits of divine action and love.²¹⁰

The critical point at issue here is that in Brink’s two narratives, the mothers in the stories are not biological mothers; they are in Brink’s case the woman who raised her, and in Gittins’s case the man (Gittins) who gives free reigns to the flourishing of his motherhood. Both Gittins and Brink support Beattie’s insight about the many ways of being a holy family and by extension of living and practicing a liberating and inclusive motherhood. For Beattie,

These images show us that there are many ways of being a holy family.

²⁰⁸ <http://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201312/praise-good-enough-family-28242>. This article appeared in the December 2013 issue of *U.S. Catholic* 78, no. 12, 34–35.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

The modern image of the Holy Family as Mary, Joseph, and Jesus replaced those extended matriarchal kinship groups of late medieval Catholicism, reflecting but also shaping widespread changes in cultural perceptions of what it means to be a family. Today, the family is once changing with the breakdown of the modern nuclear family, with divorce and remarriage, and with changing patterns of cohabitation and parenting ... instead of lamenting, we might look to the past to discover how to imagine new ways of being family and raising children, and we might ask St. Anne, God's grandmother, to pray for us.²¹¹

In this line of argument, U.S. theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill asserts, "Families may or may not include marriage, but what they always involve are intergenerational parent-child relationships extended into kinship networks."²¹² Cahill asks, "How does Catholicism view families, understood as such networks?"²¹³ The answer in part is echoed in the introduction to *Catholic Women Speak: Bringing Our Gifts to the Table*:

This anthology is a collaboration among many women [and men, considering that the Foreword, was authored by a man] who believe that the Church cannot come to a wise and informed understanding of family life without listening to women ... and for those who wish to understand how women's lives are shaped by their faith in Christ and the teachings of the Church.²¹⁴

This leads me to the fourth section of this chapter in which African women are presented as "conduits of divine action and love," as humans, not as women of institutional and sentimentalized motherhood imposed by church hierarchy and societal patriarchy.

4. African Motherhood in Conversation with Christology and Ecclesiology

In this section, I will explore how "African women demonstrate an affinity with

²¹¹ Tina Beattie, "Saint Anne: A Saint for Today? A Reflection on Grandmothers and Holy Families," in *Catholic Women Speak: Bringing Our Gifts to the Table*, ed. The Catholic Women Speak Network (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015), 73.

²¹² Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Catholic Families: Theology, Reality, and the Gospel," in *Catholic Women Speak*, 57.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 57.

²¹⁴ *Catholic Women Speak*, xxvii.

Jesus as a person who is sensitive to the misery and oppression of the weak and seeks their empowerment for liberation.”²¹⁵ I will approach Cahill’s question above from the views and perspectives of African women themselves especially in relation to their identity as women and mothers in Catholicism as reflected in their living out of their daily experiences in regard to their maternal well-being. My principal point is that liberation will come from the word of women about themselves inspired and empowered by their encounter with the risen Christ on terms familiar to women rather than from ecclesiastical rhetoric.

4.1. The Christological Experiences of African Women in Conversation with the World Church

According to renowned U.S. commentator on church affairs John Allen, “It is no longer just the North that teaches values or norms, but it’s becoming a really global conversation.”²¹⁶ Teresa Okure concurs: “Insofar as Africa exists and God has a word about it, we can speak of African theology.”²¹⁷ These statements validate the focus of this section, which examines the literature generated by African women theologians across denominational affiliations and allegiances including African women in conversations that matter about women and by women with the world church. Such conversations are not the exclusive prerogatives of the clerical and religious class. Oduyoye observes, “In the past thirty years or so, several Christological models have appeared in books written by men theologians in Africa. They share the emphasis of the Western churches but

²¹⁵ Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, eds., *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), Introduction, xiii.

²¹⁶ John Allen, “Trent Launches World Revolution in Theology,” in *National Catholic Reporter* 46, no. 23, 15; Lloyd, *Women Writers in Black Africa*, 3.

²¹⁷ Teresa Okure, “How African is African Theology,” in *Theological Reimagination: Conversations on Church, Religion, and Society in Africa*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, SJ (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2014), 44.

several go beyond these.”²¹⁸

Conversations between theologians from the global south and north need to be expanded to include the voices of the laity from all over the world and especially voices of women. To recall the earlier supplication of Beattie, perhaps we should ask Saint Anne and the mothers and grandmothers of Africa to tell us who they really are and how their stories and lives should matter to society and especially the church, where unfortunately they continue to be marginalized.

Okure echoes the questions that African theologians are asking as they try to discover and make sense of the situation of poor African women in light of the message of Jesus, whom they now experience as a friend and liberator of women and the marginalized. Far from being an easy path, this quest is laden with pitfalls, as Okure points out:

Are the categories that inspire, impact, and energize our theologizing those of theological club that is always one step ahead ... or is our theologizing informed by the multifaceted life questions of our people ... how do we theologize to meet our people’s way of knowing and searching for God ... how does our theology address the growing ills in our African and global society ... and the exploitation and marginalization of women even in the Church?²¹⁹

In section 2, we heard some of the stories of the women on motherhood and womanhood as understood and generated in African literature. Listening to their stories drew me into an active engagement with their experiences. This engagement reflects what I have described in regard to method in this research. As I mentioned, the anthropological method prioritizes presence in stillness, awareness, and respectful listening as vital ingredients in constructing a meaningful research experience. In this method, there is room to ask questions, as Okure does, and listen carefully while avoiding any judgment or conclusions issuing from my own knowledge and background.

Many African women and women theologians from all parts of the continent share some common challenges in their Christological experiences of the church in

²¹⁸ Oduyoye, “Jesus Christ, 167.

²¹⁹ Okure, “How African is African Theology,” 44–45.

Africa. Oduyoye makes a very important observation in describing how Christ is perceived in Africa by asserting,

The divinity of the Christ experienced through the Bible is that of one in control of the universe and history. In times of crisis, the Christ is expected to intervene directly on the side of the good, for God is the giver of good. In the gospels, the Christ is seen a healer, an exorcist, and a companion.²²⁰

He concludes, “All these notions feature in African Christologies and influence what women, too, say about Jesus.”²²¹ Oduyoye describes how African women in their Christologies are articulating and defining Christ for themselves in light of the “two major trends, the inculturationalist and the liberationist.”²²²

Women have employed cultural paradigms to describe their belief in Jesus, but the most-favored are the cultural ones that are also liberative. They employ myths of wonder workers who save their communities from hunger and from their enemies physical and spiritual. The women’s Christology in large measure therefore falls in the category of the liberationist types. Jesus is the brother or kin who frees women from the domination of inhumane husbands. Women relate more easily to the Christ who knew hunger, thirst, and homelessness, and they see Jesus as oppressed by the culture of his own people. Jesus the liberator is a paradigm for the critique of culture most African women theologians do.²²³

According to Oduyoye, Jesus is the one who saves and redeems.

The *Agyenkwa*, the one who rescues, who holds your life in safety, takes you out of a life-denying situation and places you in a life-affirming one. The Rescuer plucks you from a dehumanising ambience and places you in a position where you can grow toward authentic humanity. The *Agyenkwa* gives you back your life in all its wholeness and fullness.²²⁴

²²⁰ Oduyoye, “Jesus Christ,” 168.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on*

The Liberator will set us free through the process of redemption ... The imagery of God in Christ as Redeemer is one that speaks clearly to Africa. In primal societies the *ponfo*, the one who pays back a loan for someone in debt, is appreciated and revered.²²⁵

In support of Oduyoye's insightful observation, Teresia Hinga identifies variants of the model of Christ as liberator that would be appealing and useful to women; Christ the liberator as a "personal savior and personal friend" is "one of the most popular among women," "the image of Christ who helps them bear their griefs, loneliness and suffering."²²⁶ Christ liberates women from cultural prejudices, taboos, and restrictions. Christ as liberator is "the embodiment of the Spirit, the power of God." "In this pneumatic Christology, then, Christ becomes the voice of the voiceless, the power of the powerless."²²⁷ Christ as liberator is the "iconoclastic prophet" who opposes all forms of social injustice and marginalization. As liberator, Christ annuls and counters all forms of prejudice against women, including diseases and ostracism.²²⁸

Oduyoye's and Hinga's analyses as well as the works of other African women theologians are further synthesized by Diane Stinton into the main characteristics of African women's Christologies: Christology connects faith and life; the lived experience

Christianity in Africa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 18. "Christology, for African women, is the story of Jesus who saves, the one who not only announces, but also brings and lives the good news" (Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, 57).

²²⁵ Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 12.

²²⁶ Teresia Hinga, "Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa," in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 190–91; see Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Christ for African Women," in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 42; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 57.

²²⁷ Hinga, "Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa," 191.

²²⁸ Amoah and Oduyoye, "The Christ for African Women," 43.

is the locus of Christological reflection and formulation. Christology is an experience of Jesus in solidarity with women especially in conditions of adversity. Christology is a holistic theological enterprise that covers and relates to all facets of life. Liberation is liberation from “all limitations to the fullness of life envisaged in the Christ Event” even if some would be wary of the undertones, connotations, and reference to socioeconomic and political dimensions of liberation; Christology is grounded in everyday living and draws resources from the context of ordinary life. A combination of formal and informal expressions in the lives and theologies of African women “create[s] a mosaic of women’s Christologies depicting the overall image of Jesus as liberator.”²²⁹

The important point here is that how African women view and experience Christ is a reflection of how they experience themselves as women. As liberator, Christ encounters them in their situation of marginalization, exclusion, oppression, and dehumanization. At play in this encounter is an identification between Christology and motherhood that is liberating for women and the entire Christian community alike.

I will return to this theme of liberation in the final chapter of this thesis. For now, it would be important to take a more critical look at African women Christologies depicting the overall image of Jesus as liberator.

This approach to Christology by African women leaves me deeply dissatisfied. Though their rhetoric appeals to the condition, context, and experience of many women in Africa (that is, silence, oppression, and marginalization) and the concomitant imperative of liberation, this approach skims only the surface of Christological discourse; it barely touches the core of feminine imagery of the divine. Essentially, there is no difference between how African women present and relate to Christ and the centuries-old articulations of Christology rooted in male imagery, metaphor, and metaphysics. Jesus may be a liberator and personal friend for marginalized, silenced, and oppressed African women, but such Christological personalities hardly provoke a change of attitude on the part of male theologians precisely because the personality remains recognizably male. In the final analysis, whether for African women or for African men, Jesus the liberator is

²²⁹ Diane Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 204.

no other than the strong male personality of regnant Christological formulations.

In chapters 4 and 5, I will consider Elizabeth Johnson's approach to the feminine imaging of the divine. To demonstrate and illustrate the lacuna I perceive in the Christological work of African theologians, in particular African women, I draw inspiration from the brilliant study of the medieval devotion to "Jesus as Mother" by Caroline Walker Bynum.²³⁰

In her collection of essays on the differences between monks in the Middle Ages, Bynum makes some insightful observations about the motherhood of Christ on account of the medieval movement associated with the emergence of maternal/feminine imagery of God. In its application, this imagery was not limited to God and the church; it also applied to high-ranking religious officials such as abbots.

One of the most intriguing aspects of this development is that it was pioneered by male theologians and writers (Cistercian monks) in the twelfth century, men such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Gueric of Igny, and Anselm of Canterbury. In general, the imagery evoked maternal functions of birthing and maternal protection (a hen and its chicks), lactation, nursing, and nurturing.²³¹ This was a significant phenomenon in a church that was decidedly patriarchal and clerical and with an ingrained gender bias.²³²

However, the devotion would assume a dimension of great significance not only within the broader framework of the female imagery and the feminization of the language of devotion and piety but more importantly in the emergence and growth of an affective

²³⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). In the fourth chapter, "Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing," Bynum discusses the medieval "devotion to Jesus our Mother" (110–69).

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 111–12.

²³² Bynum notes perceptively that the devotion could have been more self-serving than altruistic: "The Cistercian conception of Jesus as Mother and abbot as mother reveals not an attitude toward women but a sense of a need and obligation to nurture other men, a need and obligation to achieve intimate dependence on God" (*Jesus as Mother*, 168).

spirituality championed by women.²³³ According to Bynum, examples of such affective spirituality created by women include devotion to the sacred hearth, the wounds of Jesus, the infant Jesus, and the proliferation of women mystics.

Though this devotion to Jesus as mother and the development of imagery of the feminine divine was set against the tide of sexual stereotypes such as the lack of rationality or the predominance of lustfulness in women, women's contributions created a lasting fount of imagery of the femininity of God and Jesus Christ. Consequently, it is possible, as Bynum argues, to give a more balanced interpretation to this imagery beyond the limitations and biases of sexual stereotypes. In this way, for example, gentleness and compassion would be inclusive of strength and authority as modeled by Jesus.²³⁴ The female imagery and metaphor are evocative of the nature of God in more human, compassionate, approachable, and nurturing terms. All the qualities associated with motherhood as life giving are contained in this imagery. More important, the association is not necessarily biological.

Notwithstanding this striking development, the underlying negative stereotyping of women remained largely unchanged. Rationality, authority, and potency remained the bastion of the male clerics, monks, and hierarchs. The critical point here, however, is that this medieval Christological phenomenon broke a mold. It did not remain at the surface by merely dressing Christology in feminine apparel; rather, it redefined divinity fundamentally in feminine terms, images, and metaphors. On this account, I find the Christological articulations of African women theologians still lacking a critical and incisive edge. It is more a dressage than a redefinition.²³⁵

²³³ Ibid., 129.

²³⁴ Ibid., 116 ff.

²³⁵ Another recent study that furthers Bynum's research is Sally Douglas, *Early Church Understandings of Jesus as the Female Divine: The Scandal of the Scandal of Particularity* (London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016). Douglas notes that Bynum's work "offers further potentially gripping imagery of Jesus-woman" (83). Though the constraint of space does not allow a details review, I found chapter 1: "The Scandal of the Scandal of Particularity" (1–13) and chapter 5: "Re-cognizing

To conclude this excursus and this section, I return briefly to the ecclesiological dimensions of the conversation of women.

In recent times, Pope Francis has expressed a desire for the church to stand on the side of the poor to liberate them and for the church's salvation alike. In keeping with my position in this thesis, it is about rediscovering an image of the church that is holistic and inclusive of all voices, in particular voices that have hitherto being silenced, and people—such as poor African women—who have been oppressed. In Francis's words,

I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a church concerned with being at the center and then ends up by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. (*Evangelii gaudium* no. 49).

The pope further underlines the openness and communion vitally needed in the inclusion and acceptance of all who have been impeded by the lack of flexibility in institutional structures. Though the institutional church often professes this belief in different ways, this has unfortunately not been applied to the well-being and interest of poor African women, the most marginalized of our society and church. Consequently, church documents and rhetoric about them stop short of being liberating and become oppressive to women; this is in sharp contrast to Christ's liberating love for women as expressed in the gospels.

Besides the sense of not being recognized as equals and full participants in the church, other realities make integration of church doctrines and African societal rhetoric about women problematic. In this regard, Oduyoye laments, "One of the earliest remarks that started me thinking about situation of women in Africa was the notorious 'The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.' I felt betrayed."²³⁶ From her experience, this is pure

Jesus-Woman Wisdom" (163–203) particularly insightful. Douglas's principal argument is that the early texts of Christian history and tradition not only understood, imaged, worshiped, and celebrated Jesus as divine but also understood, imaged, worshiped, and celebrated him as *female divine* (2). This tradition flourished in the worship and celebration of "Jesus-Woman Wisdom" (7).

²³⁶ Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 107.

rhetoric and a negation of maternal well-being. It is a false representation of the real situation of women in Africa:

I knew, I know, that women do not rule the world, that much is clear to me. Women are baby-sitters and teachers who run programmes, usually (and in Africa nearly always) devised by men that do not give women any choice in how they rock the cradle. Children are brought up to fit into niches. No woman wants to experience the agony of “deviant” progeny. So, in the end, we usually become very effective agents in perpetuating our own marginalization. We effect socialization by gender.²³⁷

In the same manner, women have been described as the backbone of the church by synod fathers or more appropriately synod men. Like Oduyoye, I have felt betrayed by this kind of rhetoric that hardly matches women’s real-life experiences and been disappointed at the selectiveness in—perhaps more appropriately the suppression of—the application by church men of more-positive texts. In this regard, Democratic Republic of Congo theologian Josée Ngalula rightly observes,

The texts affirming the equal dignity of men and women in the Church are not rare but many. But in pastoral practice, things happen as if these texts did not exist either because they are little known or because they are interpreted in the light of cultural patterns. Suddenly, there is a lack of women in places and positions in the Church where, in theory, they are actually supposed to be. This is primarily attributable to a certain illiteracy.²³⁸

Ngalula is referring to the lack of understanding of the basic tenet of the Christian gospel—justice and inclusion for all, especially the marginalized. Ngalula shares a personal story to explain this fact.

I am often in theological milieus and have been teaching theology to future priests for the past twenty years. I have found that in Catholic

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Josée Ngalula, “Milestones in Achieving a More Incisive Feminine Presence in the Church of Pope Francis,” in *The Church We Want: Foundations, Theology and Mission of the Church in Africa*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, SJ (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2015), 179.

circles, a fairly large number of men and women are ignorant of the major biblical and magisterial texts that affirm the dignity of women.²³⁹

Ngalula offers some indications why this may be so.

They have internalized the texts of some of the fathers and doctors of the Church who have instilled into Western religious culture ideas that imply that women by nature are “inferior,” “deficient,” and “tempting” and therefore dangerous to men. Those who are not theologically updated, and who are in positions of responsibility, do not imagine women can do anything other than marginal ministries.²⁴⁰

Ngalula’s insightful remarks echo Radford Ruether’s observation.

The Classical Christian doctrines of women’s inferiority as female and subjugation to the male were worsened by presupposing her primacy in sin. The New Testament *locus classicus* for this doctrine, as we have seen, is Timothy 2:13–14, where it is said that woman was formed second in the order of creation, but took primacy in sin. Therefore, she is to keep silent. She is not to teach or have authority over the male. She will be saved by childbearing, but only so long as she fulfils this role submissively and in modesty.²⁴¹

This has been a main reason why women in Catholicism are considered second class. This theory amounts to a victim-blaming view of women’s subordination. Women deserve this subordination both by nature and as punishment. This theory implicitly encourages men to reinforce their coercive punishment of women whenever they see them “getting out of hand.”²⁴²

Consequently, “any resistance by women to male demands for submissive obedience can justify coercive measures, including hard blows, in order to punish women

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 179–80.

²⁴¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Oppressive Aspects of Christianity,” in *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Buddhist-Christian Conversation*, ed. Rita M. Gross and Rosemary Radford Ruether (London/New York: Continuum, 2001), 94.

²⁴² Ruether, “Oppressive Aspects of Christianity,” 95.

once again for their insubordination and to return them to their ‘place’.”²⁴³ Unfortunately, this is a situation that would apply to the context of Africa, where “wife beating is implicitly sanctioned by this theory that women’s punishment status rooted in her disobedience should be continually reinforced to prevent further insubordination.”²⁴⁴

The foregoing brings us back to the question of maternal well-being as a prism for viewing and understanding the experience of women as mothers in the face of religiously sanctioned impositions by institutions such as the church of what motherhood means and how it should function in the church. As consistently argued in this thesis, only by listening to the voices of women can we as church develop a more just, liberating, and inclusive understanding of womanhood and motherhood. In this exercise, nothing substitutes for the voices of women.

4.2. In Their Own Words

The personal narrative by Nigerian maternal well-being advocate Toyin Saraki, founder of Wellbeing Foundation Africa ahead of the Global Maternal Newborn Health Conference held in Mexico City in October 2015 sets the stage for the analysis that follows.²⁴⁵

Her awareness of the gravity of issues surrounding maternal mortality and infant mortality and their impact on African women came to the fore when she experienced the tragic loss of one of her twins at birth; the second barely survived. Strikingly, Saraki was not the typically poor, uneducated, rural African woman; she was well educated and had the means to afford quality health care. Sadly, infrastructural deficiencies meant that such quality health care and qualified personnel were hard to come by in Nigeria. Her near-death ordeal awakened her to the realization “that this experience is an unavoidable reality for many women in Nigeria, and indeed across the world.” For her, maternal mortality and infant mortality were not isolated occurrences; they were major issues and

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ <http://mombloggersforsocialgood.com/2015/07/22/maternal-health-heroes-interview-with-h-e-toyin-saraki/> (accessed November 15, 2015).

concerns for maternal health. And behind the statistics are the often-untold stories of suffering of millions of poor African women.

What also became clear to Saraki were some of the key issues at play in regard to maternal health in Africa such as the stigmas “facing women during pregnancy and childbirth.” The unfortunate consequence is the reluctance of women to seek help during pregnancy “because they are either embarrassed or afraid, or simply unaware of the help that they need.”

When women access health care facilities, they encounter multiple challenges including the nonexistence of patient records or medical histories. This implies that information on the progress of a pregnancy and other critical information relative to the mother’s and the infant’s health is not available. If this is generally the case in urban centers with some exceptions, the situation is worse in rural areas. In this context, maternal health services and facilities are scarce, few, and far between. As a result, in Nigeria, as many as 14 percent of Nigerian women give birth alone without the aid of a traditional birth attendant or a family member. In the northern part of the country, the figure increases to 27 percent; this area records the highest levels of maternal mortality in the country.

For Saraki, the challenges are not insurmountable. Focusing on the training of skilled traditional birth attendants especially in rural areas, setting up affordable insurance policies, and creating basic systems for keeping patient records are easily achievable measures that would have significant positive impact on maternal health in Africa. These measures “could be the difference between life and death for these families, particularly during pregnancy.”

To conclude this narrative, Saraki makes the poignant point that the reality and potency of the scourge of maternal mortality is often the result of economic inequality. As she put it,

For many women around the world, preparation for birth means nesting, painting nurseries, and attending antenatal appointments. Yet, for pregnant women in rural areas of Nigeria, preparation for birth is ensuring they take at least 12 candles and six gallons of diesel with them to the hospital, lest the facility suffer a power cut during delivery. Included in a preparation for birth list given to women in rural areas, the candles shine a light on glaring gaps in Nigeria’s health system and infrastructure, and the need for

an approach that tackles inequity of access to adequate medical resources and social determinants of health.²⁴⁶

In keeping with the argumentation of this thesis, economic disparity is one of many aggravating factors. Social and cultural factors aided by religious belief create unfavorable conditions and jeopardize the maternal well-being of many African women.

Saraki's account comprehensively lays out the critical challenges of maternal well-being in Africa. In the context of such harrowing accounts of the tragedy of motherhood in Africa and the challenges that militate against maternal well-being, Beattie's concerns about fantastical ecclesiastical rhetoric appear ever more poignant and urgent:

While papal encyclicals abound with negative references to contraception and abortion and positive references to motherhood, marriage and the family, one can search in vain for any discussion of maternal mortality. Like his predecessors, Pope Francis has a tendency towards romanticism when speaking about motherhood. This is a dangerous fantasy when it occludes the harsh realities and struggles of women's reproductive lives.²⁴⁷

The upshot is that the discourse on motherhood is not to be treated with levity. In many parts of Africa and the developing world, it carries a death sentence for women and their children, a condition Beattie depicts with sober realism:

Yet if we are to talk of birth and vulnerability, we must speak of the vulnerability of the maternal as well as the infant body, for the woman is not invincible in this process. There is a tragic dimension to birth, which needs not moral judgement and philosophical analysis, but the language of healing, compassion, redemption and renewal. Not every woman who conceives a child can or will become a mother. At this complex interface of life and death, of natality and mortality, there are no clear answers, no philosophical arguments adequate to the task of discernment.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/aug/27/> (accessed October 31, 2015).

²⁴⁸ Beattie, "A Mother is Born," 23.

In light of the foregoing, the voices of African women can become a beacon of light that illuminates the challenges women encounter in Africa. However, as consistently underlined in this and the previous chapter (and in subsequent chapters), the obstacles women face are deeply embedded in long-standing and systemic cultural constructs that often implicate women. In this regard, Kanyoro asserts, “Women in Africa are the custodians of cultural practices. For generations, African women have guarded traditional practices that are strictly observed for fear of breaking taboos.”²⁴⁹ Examples are many, but from my own experience, one such practice is women’s powerlessness in rejecting their daughters’ early marriages; the inability to resist this practice ultimately results in disastrous consequences such as a high maternal mortality rate for girls and younger women.

As mentioned, Kanyoro’s rightly claims, “Women themselves are the objects of these practices and are diminished by them.”²⁵⁰ It is common in some parts of Africa for “harmful traditional practices [to be] passed on as ‘cultural values’ and therefore are not to be discussed, challenged, or changed. In the guise of culture, harmful practices and traditions are perpetuated.”²⁵¹ Another practice undergirded by cultural beliefs Saraki mentioned above is that women in rural areas can give birth safely at home without any medical and appropriate healthcare because they are “strong.”

Changing these beliefs can prove quite daunting because “when trained theologians begin to make connections between what happens at home and in church with a view to suggesting change in the name of justice, they have to be cautious about disturbing the set order.”²⁵² Kanyoro observes, “It takes time and extended discussions

²⁴⁹ Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, “Engendered Communal Theology: African Women’s Contribution to Theology in the Twenty-First Century” in Pui-lan, *Hope Abundant*, 20.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid.

with other women in order to establish the trust necessary to begin advocating change.”²⁵³ In this regard, African women theologians echo Kanyoro’s claim that theology in Africa cannot undermine the very experience of the people involved in the theologizing:

It would be easier simply to pursue the study of academic theology, that is, reading, reflecting, and writing. But for us in Africa, it does not matter how much we write about our theology in books; the big test before us is whether we can bring change to our societies. This is a tall order and we agonize over it.²⁵⁴

Doing theology in Africa constitutes an exercise in contextual theology, and it should take into account such experiences as maternal well-being and maternal mortality that continue to plague the continent at alarming rates. For theological discourse and ecclesial rhetoric to be authentic and credible, they cannot overlook the reality that confronts the continent’s women and their reproductive well-being especially when ecclesiological rhetoric continuously and routinely adopts feminine symbolisms to represent and define the nature, place, and role of women in church and society.

Whether understood as womanhood or motherhood, these symbolisms are not purely metaphorical not least in situations where “an estimated 287,000 maternal deaths occurred worldwide in 2010, most of which were in low-income and middle-income countries and were avoidable.”²⁵⁵ Judging from the narratives of African women theologians examined in this chapter, such issues are a theological priority for African women as they should be for the rest of society and the church.

From the foregoing analysis, as Kanyoro has argued, it is clear that “the issues on which we focus in our theological work are African: they are both religious and cultural at the same time, but they affect women differently from the way they affect men.”²⁵⁶

Women in Africa are clearly not accepting the second-class, subservient role

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 20–21.

²⁵⁵ “Introduction,” *The Lancet Global Health* 2, no. 6 (June 2014), e323–e333, <http://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X%2814%2970227-X/fulltext> (accessed November 23, 2015).

²⁵⁶ Kanyoro, “Engendered Communal Theology,” 27.

foisted on them by a convergence of social, religious, cultural, and political factors and actors. The implicit and explicit mechanisms of silencing and rendering women invisible elicit strong reactions and protests. As award-winning Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie declares, “Each time they ignore me, I feel invisible. I feel upset. I want to tell them that I am just as human as the man, just as worthy of acknowledgement.”²⁵⁷ African women are asking very pertinent question about forms of discrimination they experience from the opposite sex. They are alarmed by the lack of recognition of their sexuality, which in many cases has led to the way society treats women, thus paying less attention to the horrific experiences of death being inflicted on women, whose life spans are shortened by maternal death.

Conclusion

According to the World Health Organization,

Women in developing countries have, on average, many more pregnancies than women in developed countries, and their lifetime risk of death due to pregnancy is higher. A woman’s lifetime risk of maternal death—the probability that a 15 year old woman will eventually die from a maternal cause—is 1 in 4900 in developed countries, versus 1 in 180 in developing countries. In countries designated as fragile states, the risk is 1 in 54; showing the consequences from breakdowns in health systems.²⁵⁸

In their 1994 message to the women of Africa, the fathers of the African synod declared, “We are convinced that the quality of our Church-as-Family also depends on the quality of our women-folk, be they married or members of institutes of the consecrated life.”²⁵⁹ If the synod is right, several consequences follow. First, considering

²⁵⁷ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), 20.

²⁵⁸ WHO, Maternal Mortality, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs348/en/> (accessed December 1, 2015).

²⁵⁹

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20091023_message-synod_en.html (accessed December 1, 2015).

the quality and well-being of African women who have been visibly marred by the wounds of maternal mortality, the church also bears on its body such marks and afflictions. Therefore, theology cannot avoid dealing with these issues. Second, it behooves the church to take concrete steps toward addressing this situation and guaranteeing the integrity of the body of Christ. Third, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, listening to women and their narratives as well as recognizing, affirming, and integrating their gifts represent essential criteria for the credibility and authenticity of the theological and ecclesiological response. Fourth, the imagery adopted in formulating this response ought to be critically vetted for signs and vestiges of androcentric and misogynist stereotypes and biases.

This metaphor and symbolisms of church as family will be unifying if women are not relegated to the background as servers and maids to men. John Mbiti quotes a saying about African women: “A beautiful picture of women in African society is presented in a proverb from Ghana, which says: ‘A woman is a flower in a garden; her husband is the fence around it’.”²⁶⁰ This shows that “the mother or wife is probably the most important member of the family; she is the center of familyhood.”²⁶¹ Considering the challenges outlined in this chapter, women easily become the sacrificial lambs, the self-sacrificing ones whose presence is only to perform duties that will sustain the men, the heads of the families, and extend their heritage and lineage at the expense of women’s reproductive rights and integrity. But as Beattie points out without any hint of sentimentality, this sacrifice has a vital affinity with the sacrifice of Christ: “To give birth is to make a blood sacrifice, a sacrifice of one’s own blood. It is to say, ‘This is my body, this is my blood, given for you’.”²⁶² Women understand this experience; the church that claims to be family of God needs to learn the meaning and implication of this experience from women.

In the next chapter, I will present and analyze the narratives of several African

²⁶⁰ Jacob Obafemi Kehinde Olupona, *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 59.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁶² Beattie, “A Mother is Born,” 19.

women that give meaning to the idea of birthing and motherhood as a blood sacrifice
leading to life not just for women and their children but also for their entire communities.

Chapter 3

Living Witnesses and Prophetic Voices: Maternal Values of African Women

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. (Acts 2: 1–4).²⁶³

Introduction

This chapter continues the analysis I began in the two previous chapters and has a twofold objective. First, it focuses on concrete examples and models of African women's witness to new paradigms and narratives of self-worth and self-definition in the face of entrenched cultural, religious, and social biases. The aim is to present some African women who create and exemplify identities and roles beyond those defined in narrow biological terms of motherhood ("wives and mothers").

Second, in light of the praxis of African women and their prophetic practices, I will show how maternal values—in the form of gifts of the Spirit—continue to shape and inform those identities and roles as alternative models of the meaning, function, roles, and ministry in the church.

So far, the voices of poor African women we have heard in this thesis recount their quests for wholeness as human persons made in the *imago Dei*. Their story is a sustained and profound cry for life and its fullness in all the dimensions of their existence in church and society. This story is the true story of several of my African sisters whose daughters died at childbirth, of my sisters who are not sure if death will be their lot at childbirth, of my African sisters who have been raped and are experiencing complications as they approach childbirth. It is true of my African sisters who are in refugee camps and war-torn countries living under the abusive control of men who would subject them to

²⁶³ Donald Senior and John J. Collins, *The Catholic Study Bible: The New American Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1444–46.

pregnancies that might lead to death, and of all my sisters who cannot afford maternal care and as such will eventually die.

A South African proverb says, “*Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” or “*Motho ke motho ka batho*”; both translate loosely as, “A person is a person because of/through other persons” or “I am, because we are.” Thus, my humanity is intimately tied with those of my sisters all over the world. Their liberation is linked to my liberation; their human flourishing is inseparable from my human flourishing. For this reason, the narrative approach I have adopted for this study does not allow me the luxury of separating myself from the stories in this thesis.

For the purposes of the task outlined for this chapter, I adopt Pentecost as the paradigm for achieving both goals based on the premise that the prophetic lives of the women in this chapter are embodiments of the Holy Spirit’s transformative gifts. Consequently, they appear not as extraordinary or heroic women but as faithful members of the community through whose ministries the Spirit speaks to the church and society in Africa and the world (see Revelation 2:29). Thus, rooted in this Pentecostal paradigm, we may not simply dismiss them as familiar acts of heroism; they are acts of the Spirit for the edification of the church of the risen Christ and the creation of a more inclusive and equitable community of the people of God. I begin by revisiting the understanding of the Spirit in the life of the church.

1. Pentecost Revisited: the Holy Spirit in the Church

At Pentecost, Jesus’ apostles and followers experienced a transformative moment of being “filled with the Holy Spirit” and receiving gifts that emboldened them to proclaim the good news in “different tongues.” The gifts included healing the sick, baptizing, unifying Christian communities, and preaching.²⁶⁴ That Pentecost event heralded the liberation from fear of those early Christians and thus irrevocably changed their lives; it opened the door for a deep and profound union with Christ. They began to reflect the life of Christ through the manifestations of gifts of the Spirit that enabled them

²⁶⁴ Elizabeth Teresa Groppe, *Yves Congar’s Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 58.

to build and live communal, Christ-centered lives.

Renu Rita Silvano and Fio Mascarenhas make the interesting observation that in the “new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, thirty seven pages are devoted to God the Father, fifty pages to Jesus Christ, and only twelve pages to the Holy Spirit.”²⁶⁵ This gives cause for thought regarding the significance that theologians accord the role and understanding of the Spirit of God.

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the third person of the blessed Trinity is a familiar one to most Christians. The paucity of material on the Holy Spirit as observed by Silvano and Mascarenhas suggests that the understanding of the Holy Spirit continues to be elusive and mysterious for many in the church today. However, there is evidence that notable progress has been made in moving Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit out of the shadows of the past. In the book *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, Harvey Cox studied in depth the rise of Pentecostal Christianity and drawn attention to the ensuing “period of renewed religious vitality” and “great awakening” “with all the promise and peril religious revivals always bring with them.”²⁶⁶ A case in point is the profound activity of the Spirit of God in Africa, especially in African Initiated Churches (AICs). “The Spirit manifests his presence and power personally in these churches, making a dynamic relationship between God and his people possible.”²⁶⁷

While the Spirit is working in these churches, one could say that the activity of the Spirit has skipped over Western categories of theological thought and simply moved into the lives of the people. The enthusiastic embrace of the Spirit of God and the

²⁶⁵ Renu Rita Silvano and Fr. Fio Mascarenhas, *The Holy Spirit* (New Delhi, India: National Charismatic Office, 1980), 11.

²⁶⁶ Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1995), xvi.

²⁶⁷ Allan Anderson, “African Initiated Churches of the Spirit and Pneumatology,” in *Word and World* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 179, http://www2.luthersem.edu/Word&World/Archives/23-2_Holy_Spirit/23-2_Anderson.pdf (accessed January 4, 2016).

activities of the Spirit as understood by Christians have left theologians with many unanswered questions. Not for the first time, it would seem as if the Spirit of God has moved ahead without permission of the official church. The Acts of the Apostles contains precedents of this movement of the Spirit wherever she wills (see for example the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10).²⁶⁸

Notwithstanding the relative dearth of attention in the pre–Vatican II era (both in theology and by the magisterium) to the role and action of the Spirit of God, scripture contains a vibrant and dynamic understanding of the person, actions, and gifts of the Holy Spirit. For example, Paul’s letters contain testimonies of remarkable actions of the Spirit bestowing gifts and virtues (1 Corinthians 12:4ff) on the new and young Christian communities. Indeed, it became clear to the new Christians that each man and woman was a dwelling place of this compelling energy of God. In this way, each man and woman would be called to embrace the life of Jesus Christ; become Christ in the world; follow in the footsteps of Christ through Christ’s suffering, agony, and death on the cross; and become totally one with Christ in his resurrection. This is the path of every Christian since the time of Christ. All Christians have stories to tell of how they experienced Christ in their lives, slowly being purified of all that was not of him so finally, each one could say with certainty, “I, now not I, but Christ lives in me.”²⁶⁹

The gifts are given freely by the Spirit of God, and the expressions of the gifts vary according to each person’s context and capacity to receive. The presence of the Spirit engenders significant and substantial effect in the life of Christians and of the church. As Bevens and Schroeder affirm in their book, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, the Holy Spirit is “God’s complete presence, palpable, able to be experienced, and yet elusive, like the wind.”²⁷⁰ She is behind and within all that is

²⁶⁸ Stephen B. Bevens and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 24–25.

²⁶⁹ Peter Stravinskias, ed., *Our Sunday Visitor: Catholic Encyclopedia* (Revised Edition) (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1991, 1998), 504.

²⁷⁰ Stephen B. Bevens and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 11.

material; she is the movement of God's energy, which permeates all that happens on the earth and in the universe. She is the dance of God through all creation, weaving in and through all human experiences.²⁷¹

When Pope John XXIII convoked Vatican II on January 25, 1959, he expressly alluded to the action of the Holy Spirit sweeping through the church. Vatican II throws light on the transformation that has occurred in the church's understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit since the time of Leo XIII, in part on account of a series of theological renewals including, as mentioned by Cox, the revival of Pentecostal spirituality. The Holy Spirit was brought forward front and center and moved out of the pre-Vatican II shadow of the "forgotten God." Systematic theologian and ecumenist Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen wrote, "This council could be called the 'Council of the Holy Spirit' for, as Pope Paul VI pointed out, there are 258 references to the Holy Spirit in the pages of the Council documents."²⁷²

Speaking of the work of theologians at the council, Bishop James Malone affirms that they indeed had a major role to play in helping the bishops to better formulate and understand the major breakthroughs expressed in its documents. More important, Malone wrote, "The Council was first the work of the Holy Spirit."²⁷³

A cursory look at the principal documents of Vatican II makes for fascinating reading on the role and action of the Holy Spirit in the milestone event of the council itself and in the universal church. In the understanding of the Council, Vatican II was convoked in the Holy Spirit (*Lumen gentium* no. 1; *Gaudium et spes* no. 3). If the church is the repository and transmitter of a positive tradition, this process, which includes growth and development of the tradition itself, is a living reality animated by the action of the Holy Spirit (*Dei verbum*, nos. 8–10, 21). And as the bride of Christ, the incarnate Word, the community called church has the Holy Spirit for its teacher (*Dei verbum* no.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 34.

²⁷³ Bishop James Malone, "How Bishops and Theologians Relate," *Origins* 16, no. 9 (July 31, 1986): 49.

23). The action of the Holy Spirit is indispensable as a guarantee for the necessary, constant renewal and regeneration of the church (*Lumen gentium*, nos. 9–10; *Gaudium et spes* no. 21). The graces, charisms, and gifts needed for the nourishment, growth, and sustenance of the church for the fulfillment of its ministry are given in abundance by the Holy Spirit (*Lumen gentium* no. 12).

Besides being the body of Christ and the people of God, the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit (*Lumen gentium* no. 17; *Ad gentes* no. 7). Chapter 3 of *Lumen gentium* makes the claim that the Holy Spirit is the foundation, support, and inspiration for the hierarchical structure of the church (*Lumen gentium* no. 22). As for the mission of the church, it derives from the mission of Jesus Christ and the mission of the Holy Spirit (*Ad gentes*, nos. 2, 5, 23, 29). Alive and active in the world and in the church, the Holy Spirit makes possible the mission of evangelization and the effect of salvation for the world and for the church (*Ad gentes* no. 4; *Gaudium et spes*, nos. 22, 38). This brief sampling confirms Kärkkäinen’s claim that Vatican II was a “Council of the Holy Spirit.”

At a general audience on August 12, 1998, John Paul II noted that Vatican II spoke to the activity of the Holy Spirit as being “where the Spirit also works in a unique and full manner, but should be recognized outside the visible frontiers of Christ’s body as well (cf. *Gaudium et spes* no. 22; *Lumen gentium* no. 16).”²⁷⁴ In a word, the Spirit of God is everywhere!

Pope John Paul II traces the activity of the Spirit in the life of the church in his encyclical *Dominum et vivificantem* (On the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World). According to the pope, the Spirit of God is the life-giving water Jesus promised to Nicodemus and to the Samaritan woman. This same Spirit appeared in tongues over the heads of the fearful disciples at Pentecost. Again, this Spirit accompanied the small and developing church and guided Peter and Paul and the other disciples in the spreading

²⁷⁴ Pope John Paul II, general audience, August 12, 1998, “The Holy Spirit Acts in All Creation and History,” 1, http://conservation.catholic.org/holy_spirit_acts_in_all_creation.htm (accessed January 4, 2016).

of the good news of Jesus Christ across the world.²⁷⁵ Always walking with the church through the working of the various councils, the Holy Spirit never ceases to be present.

Pope John Paul II's encyclical is one in the line of several papal attempts to define the role and actions of the Spirit in the church. In reality, as I already mentioned above, it was not until Leo XIII published the encyclical *Divinum illud munus* (On the Holy Spirit) that the church directly addressed the role of the Holy Spirit. Leo XIII, attempting to arouse devotion in the faithful, wrote profusely about

the indwelling and miraculous power of the Holy Ghost; and the extent and efficiency of His action, both in the whole body of the Church and in the individual souls of its members, through the glorious abundance of His divine graces.²⁷⁶

This work was followed by Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici corporis* in 1943. Pius XII "spoke of the Holy Spirit as the vital principle of the Church, in which he works in union with the Head of the Mystical Body, Christ."²⁷⁷

Though Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI did not write any encyclical on the Holy Spirit, he referred to the Holy Spirit in *Deus caritas est*. During his pontificate, he made several references to the role of the Holy Spirit in the church in his general teachings or catechesis. In dedicating 2008–2009 as the year of St. Paul, he spoke in his general audiences of the Spirit as viewed through the eyes of St. Paul: "St. Paul teaches that the Holy Spirit directs us towards the great values of love, joy, communion and hope: our

²⁷⁵ John Paul II, *Dominum et vivificantem* (On the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World), 1986, 1–2,

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paulii/encyclicals/document (accessed January 4, 2016).

²⁷⁶ Leo XIII, *Divinum Illud Munus* (On the Holy Spirit), 1897,

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_09051897_divinum-illud-munus_en.html (accessed January 4, 2016).

²⁷⁷ John Paul II, *Dominum et vivificantem* (On the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World), 1986, 2.

task is to experience them every day.”²⁷⁸ He connected his catechesis to *Deus caritas est*: “The Spirit ... is that interior power which harmonizes [believers’] hearts with Christ’s Heart and moves them to love their brethren as Christ loved them.”²⁷⁹

It is perhaps still too early to identify a definitive corpus of Pope Francis’s teaching on the Holy Spirit. However, by way of illustration, a close reading of his inaugural encyclical, *Evangelii gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) reveals his conviction and understanding of the Holy Spirit as the prime mover and animator of what the pope calls “missionary discipleship.” Missionary discipleship constitutes a defining characteristic of individual believers and of the church as the people of God. In both instances, missionary discipleship represents the gospel mandate to spread the message of our encounter with the love of God in the person of Jesus Christ “nourished by the light and strength of the Holy Spirit” (no. 50). In particular, the Holy Spirit is the source of renewal for the church and the world. Regarding the latter, Francis holds that “stifling worldliness can only be healed by breathing in the pure air of the Holy Spirit who frees us from self-centredness cloaked in an outward religiosity bereft of God” (no. 97).

Without undertaking an extensive analysis of *Evangelii gaudium*, three examples of the dynamic, revitalizing, and renewing role of the Holy Spirit in the church worth noting are the renewal of the youth, the growth of popular piety, and the principle of inculturation. In regard to the first, Francis affirms,

The rise and growth of associations and movements mostly made up of young people can be seen as the work of the Holy Spirit, who blazes new trails to meet their expectations and their search for a deep spirituality and a more real sense of belonging. (no. 105)

In this treatment of the rise and development of popular piety in various parts of the world, the pope recognizes this movement as an “ongoing and developing process, of which the Holy Spirit is the principal agent” (nos. 122–66).

²⁷⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, general audience on November 15, 2006. *L’Osservatore Romano*, <http://www.ewtm/cp/library/PAPALDOC/b16ChrstChrch24.htm> (accessed January 4, 2016).

²⁷⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, general audience on Wednesday, November 15, 2006.

The third example is perhaps the most interesting from the perspective of African theology. Francis underlines the incontestable role of the Holy Spirit as the principle behind the movement and development of inculturation:

Whenever a community receives the message of salvation, the Holy Spirit enriches its culture with the transforming power of the Gospel. The history of the Church shows that Christianity does not have simply one cultural expression, but rather, “remaining completely true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, it will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root.” In the diversity of peoples who experience the gift of God, each in accordance with its own culture, the Church expresses her genuine catholicity and shows forth the “beauty of her varied face.” In the Christian customs of an evangelized people, the Holy Spirit adorns the Church, showing her new aspects of revelation and giving her a new face. (no. 116)

This brief attempt to highlight the various conciliar and papal teachings that underscore the significant role and activity of the Holy Spirit in the church sets the stage for the following sections on the experiences and narratives of some African women as models of the gifts of the Spirit to the church.

2. African Women: Experiences of the Reality and Gifts of the Spirit

Many African women are deeply committed to the movement of the Holy Spirit in their spiritualities and lives. This is especially obvious in the way it reflects in their gifts of leadership and devotion. In most African countries, even though relegated to the margins, women form the backbone of society. Characteristically, for most African women whose profound desire is to give life, finding their gifts and using them to improve their communities is of the utmost importance despite formidable challenges that confront them as evident in previous chapters.

The awareness of the Holy Spirit is intrinsically connected with African societies. This legacy of the Spirit is present among many Africans in concrete and real ways. It would be an illusion to imagine the continued existence of African cultures in their pristine state. The encounter between Africa and the agents of colonization did not leave the continent’s religious traditions and cultures intact and unchanged. While the experiences of colonization and postcolonization have destroyed many aspects of

traditional practices, there is still a widespread tradition in many African societies that creates a sense of solidarity in the midst of the complex and sometimes violent struggles that are also part of modern African societies. In many African societies, there is a sense of solidarity with nature and with all life. The universe is perceived as a living and animated whole. Nature takes care of the people by providing what is needed to sustain life.

Many Africans communities strongly believe there are connections between all that makes up the universe, including their ancestors. Because of these attitudes, many natural resources have been preserved because they are considered sacred. Some forests are considered sacred, and certain trees are not to be harmed. Certain mountains, streams, rivers, hills, and some animals are seen as intrinsically connected to the community's survival. These sacred places are the dwellings of the deities, ancestors, gods, and their messengers. "The African universe is charged with a palpable spiritual energy; this energy comes from faith in the existence of many spiritual realities: gods, goddesses, deities, ancestral spirits, and so on."²⁸⁰

One fascinating observation is the strong similarity between the African worldview of spirits and the biblical view of the Holy Spirit. Bevans illustrates this similarity in his anthropological model in which he describes Robert Hood's understanding of it. He affirms,

The biblical worldview regarding the Spirit of God ... is very similar to the African worldview regarding the spirits. It is the Spirit that "will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak" (Jn 16:13), and this is similar to the African belief that the spirits are given authority by God to act in certain ways in the world.²⁸¹

Just as the prophets were driven by the Spirit to speak God's Word, so in African religion, the spirits give power and inspiration. Like the spirits that stand before God's throne ready to do God's bidding, so the spirits in African religion serve as messengers to human beings.²⁸² This correlation between the Holy Spirit and spirits calls for more

²⁸⁰ Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 141.

²⁸¹ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 63.

²⁸² Ibid.

analysis. This chapter is about how the Spirit gives power and inspiration to African women.

In their conclusion to *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, Healey and Sybertz affirm,

The Holy Spirit is at work in the African local churches and in local communities everywhere. The “Unsurpassed Great Spirit” is active in Africa, helping people to write new narrative theologies of inculturation and liberation.²⁸³

This view of the Holy Spirit as active in the lives of Africans honors the realities from which African lives emerge. However, it is also a reality that spirits have a place in African religion and culture.

According to Gerrie Ter Haar, the presence of spirits is so interwoven with the daily lives of Africans that this reality cannot be ignored. “Spirit mediumship is a well-known phenomenon in Africa ... the invisible spirit is believed to take possession of the person in such a way that his or her body becomes a vehicle for the spirit.”²⁸⁴ The person, then, will demonstrate who that spirit is through voice and mannerisms that are not like that person’s usual persona.²⁸⁵

Ter Haar’s position is based on the extensive and groundbreaking work of Felicitas Goodman, especially *How about Demons? Possession and Exorcism in the Modern World*.²⁸⁶ Goodman makes a rather simple but brilliant analogy between being in a trance and driving a car—the body is the car and the soul is the driver, assuming belief in the theory of the soul: “Just as the driver owns the car, so the soul owns the body.”²⁸⁷ A driver may invite a friend who has no car to enter and drive the car while he or she is

²⁸³ Healey and Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, 377.

²⁸⁴ Gerrie Ter Haar, *How God Became African: Spirituality and Western Secular Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 38.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁶ Felicitas Goodman, *How About Demons? Possession and Exorcism in the Modern World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

the passenger. He or she may decide to once again be the driver and take the place of the friend, which is not always uncomplicated. This is akin to what happens in spirit possession: an alternate reality with no body enters another to use it for a while.²⁸⁸

Goodman's analysis paints a picture of a complex landscape that involves the intersection of a variety of religious experiences including trance, ecstasy, spirit possession, demon possession, visions, spirit journeys, divinations, etc. Though she carefully delineates these experiences, the boundaries are as fluid—the lines between them and personality disorders and psychoses are thin.

Ter Haar agrees with Goodman but introduces more nuance to the distinctions she makes. What might be perceived in some Western cultures as multiple personality syndromes may be perceived in African culture as being taken over by spirits. While the instances may appear to be similar, the cultural context differs considerably. In one culture, this is accepted as part of the social landscape; in the other, this behavior is considered an aberration.²⁸⁹ This explains why in African traditional society, the world of spirits is appreciated and acknowledged more than it is in the Western world.

Goodman's work demonstrates that the myth of the decline in the phenomena of trance and possession is greatly exaggerated. Anybody who is familiar with the growth of Christianity in twenty-first century Africa is aware of the popularity of so-called deliverance ministries that thrive on exorcism and spirit possession. The flip side, however, reveals a disturbing pattern of gender-based abuse precisely because there is a preference for branding women as agents of demonic possession, which reinforces an already well-established and deadly stereotype. As Kristof and WuDunn argue, the roots of such stereotypes run deep in the strong currents of sexism and misogyny:

Behind the rapes and other abuse heaped on women in much of the world, it's hard not to see something more sinister than just libido and prurient opportunism. Namely: sexism and misogyny. How else to explain why so many more witches were burned than wizards? Why is acid thrown in women's faces, but not in men's? Why are women so much more likely to be stripped naked and sexually humiliated than men? Why is it that in many cultures, old men are respected as patriarchs, while old women are

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 1–41.

²⁸⁹ Ter Haar, *How God Became African*, 40.

taken outside the village to die of thirst or to be eaten by wild animals? Granted, in the societies where these abuses take place, men also suffer more violence than males do in America—but the brutality inflicted on women is particularly widespread, cruel, and lethal. These attitudes are embedded in culture and will change only with education and local leadership.²⁹⁰

Those women and men who grow up in the context of African religion are well aware of these spirits whose actions are a backdrop to their daily lives. However, as I have indicated above, there is a negative side to this reality.

Oduyoye explains that the African worldview has three dimensions to it—first, the recognition of God who is the supreme origin of all; second, the dimension of humankind, and third, the dimension of the spirits that inhabit the thinly veiled world between God and humans. In this understanding, God is all in all, the one to whom humanity and the spirits owe allegiance. Often, the spirits are considered the ancestors who have walked the earth before us and are available for consultation about concerns, struggles, and life experiences.²⁹¹

In regard to the presence and actions of spirits, by their lives and experiences of religion and spirituality, according to Oduyoye, African women pose a deeper set of questions: “‘Whose voice is the voice of the ancestors, the voice of tradition?’ And ‘Where is the voice for today coming from?’”²⁹² Much that is accepted as African religion needs to be brought into a process of analysis, discernment, and transformation. Engaging in contextual theology—such as I do in this thesis—demands a meticulous and thoughtful response to traditions that have been held dear for centuries. Always keeping the unsurpassed Spirit in mind, the spirits must be subjected to a prayerful process that enables African women to set things right.²⁹³ The spirits must be tested, discerned, and interrogated, not simply acknowledged.

The whole notion of the Spirit calls for attention because “whatever is keeping subordination of women alive in the church cannot be the Spirit of God. The church is

²⁹⁰ Kristof and WuDunn *Half the Sky*, 67.

²⁹¹ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 45.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

intended to be the *ecclesia* of all people, women and men, across all social barriers.”²⁹⁴ The church is called to review its attitudes and treatment of women in the context of testing the spirits to be sure the treatment of women is in concert with the movement of the Spirit of God toward just relationships. This is a reminder that negative spirits can inhabit unjust systems as well as ordinary humans. One notable example in line with my argumentation is maternal and infant mortality. If the Spirit is the giver and animator of life, surely the plague of maternal and infant mortality must be considered a negation and deadening of the Spirit; widespread occurrence of maternal mortality must be an evil spirit at work.

Generally, spirits in the African worldview are perceived as positive and life giving. These spirits are treated with the same respect and deference that one would have in relating to others in the human community. And just as in our day-to-day relationships we take care not to be insulting, so it is with the spirit world. Good relationships are always valued. The same way a person speaks with one’s family about concerns and asks advice, so too in regard to the spirits.²⁹⁵ The spirits are everywhere!²⁹⁶

To return, then, to the question of how can we know if a given phenomenon is of the Holy Spirit or something else, Yves Congar describes what it is like to be one with the Spirit of God. We can recognize this presence when we are led to a deeper sense of community and love for each other. We develop a sense of unity that moves us toward a wholeness of being that reflects God’s freedom in our daily lives. Above all, we are called to profound worship of God and experience being drawn to Jesus Christ.²⁹⁷ As John Shea puts it, “When divine love meets human sinfulness, the person is reconciled and recreated. Whenever this happens, the ultimate author of the event is the Spirit.”²⁹⁸

Before leaving this topic of the Holy Spirit and spirits as seen in African culture

²⁹⁴ Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 97.

²⁹⁵ Ter Haar, *How God Became African*, 35.

²⁹⁶ Magesa, *African Religion*, 53–55.

²⁹⁷ Groppe, *Yves Congar’s Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 98–99.

²⁹⁸ John Shea, *An Experience of Spirit: Spirituality and Storytelling* (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri Press, 2004), 120–21.

and religion, it is important to take note of what is happening in many of the Spirit churches. Allan Anderson, professor of global Pentecostalism at the University of Birmingham in England, explores this concept as expressed through these churches. He has found that what is happening in the Spirit churches closely resembles what occurred in the early church communities—speaking in tongues, healings, prophetic utterances, discerning, and casting out of spirits. “The confrontation between the African spirit world and the Holy Spirit in these African churches incisively penetrates the African worldview and makes Christianity relevant there.”²⁹⁹ In this confrontation,

The astonishing thing is that here the Holy Spirit is seen not just as a divine Person, but as the *divine element* too. The Spirit is “sent” and “comes” like a tempest; it spreads itself out over all living things, like the waters of a flood, pervading everything ... in the “outpouring of God’s Spirit,” God opens himself.³⁰⁰

Robert Hood concurs with this position in his description of the particularity of the Holy Spirit in the religious worldview of African and African-American spirituality: “The Spirit in black piety, however, is less an intellectual concept of the academy and theologians, and much more an active, engaging, life-giving, and possessing power to be experienced, and testified to.”³⁰¹

The action of the Holy Spirit working in so many diverse settings in Africa presents African theologians with the raw material necessary for discernment of spirits and theological reflection. In many aspects of the lives of Africans, the confrontation mentioned above is a vital feature of their devotional life and spirituality.

As mentioned, in African religious traditions, God permeates all things. Despite some aberration referenced above, the spirit world is not alien to many African women as

²⁹⁹ Alan Anderson, “African Initiated Churches and Pneumatology,” *Word & World* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 185, http://www2.luthersem.edu/Word&World/Archives/23-2_Holy_Spirit/23-2_Anderson.pdf.

³⁰⁰ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 12–13.

³⁰¹ Robert Hood, *Must God Remain Greek? Afro Cultures and God-Talk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 206.

a source of power and strength. Though African society is highly patriarchal, many women in Africa continue in their struggle to discover creative ways of defining and naming themselves and their experiences as human persons with dignity and as *imago Dei*. In this context, their strength rarely comes from outside, where they are already defined and categorized according to their “nature”; rather, it comes from deep within, from a spiritual source.

In the midst of pain, subjugation, and oppression, many African women journey inward for strength and resilience to confront the forces that seek to silence and oppress them. As some of the examples in this thesis show, many African women have learned to cope but have not given up on the quest to find and define themselves. This struggle takes place in society and in the male-dominated African church, which is reluctant to allow women space to share their gifts even though the majority of its members are women and are the spiritual and communal pillars of the church.

In the course of this study, my experience of some African women has yielded a deeper awareness of the presence of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in their lives. An important finding of this study is that the gift of their spirituality is a concrete manifestation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit—wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, piety, fortitude, and fear of the Lord. Thus, an encounter with them is an encounter with giftedness of the Spirit through an African lens. Perhaps this should not be too surprising. Christian theology affirms the universality of the Spirit:

The Spirit of God has been present to creation from the beginning of time. The Spirit is divine energy deep within God’s evolving creation, the source of its creative evolution, its increasing complexity, its growth in consciousness, its unity, its diversity.³⁰²

While the expression of the Spirit’s gifts may vary from culture to culture, the gifts of the Spirit are nevertheless recognizable:

This Holy Spirit comes like breath, like wind, like fire, to which both Luke and the Gospel of John testify. There is no reason to limit the outpouring

³⁰² Donald J. Goergen, *Fire of Love: Encountering the Holy Spirit* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 106.

of God's Spirit, no reason to suggest that this one, holy, universal Spirit does not break through in manifold ways into the workings of the world itself—from within creation and throughout all of history.³⁰³

The gifts of the Spirit may not be lived out the same way in every setting. Yet the multiple expressions in cultures enhance and build the body of Christ and bring the reign of God in the world closer in distinct and unique ways.

One example might serve to illustrate the foregoing point. The Owe people of Kwara in Nigeria are steeped in the practice of African religion. It is a patriarchal community in which adult males control all activities. The male domination is counterbalanced by a group of women known as *ofusi*. These women are initiated into a deeply religious society that involves spirit possession. The women sing and dance through the town and are perceived as god's spouses—*Aya Olua*. These priestesses bring special messages to the community or to individuals there. When the possessed priestess speaks, she does so in the male voice of the divinity.³⁰⁴ This is an interesting phenomenon. The African society, though very patriarchal, cannot ignore the unique way the divine is expressed in the feminine. Often common with African women, spirit possession brings the divine to life as feminine in the community. This is a crucial point that appears to have eluded African women theologians as I have pointed out in chapter 2.

In many of the African Independent Churches (AICs), women provide ecclesial and ministerial leadership. As has many of her counterparts, Kenyan theologian Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike has examined the role of women in the church in regard to the exercise of leadership and authority. While criticizing deeply rooted clericalism and skewed patriarchal interpretations of scripture, both of which relegate women to subordinate roles in the church, she points out a common trend where African women have founded AICs. These women-found and women-led churches become ecclesial contexts for the exercise

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Joseph Akinyele, "The Role of Women in African Traditional Religion," in *African Traditional Religion in Contemporary Society*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 75–76.

of different charisms, including leadership and authority in the churches.³⁰⁵

3. The Spirit in the Lives of African Women: New Roles and Identities

In the previous section, I made a case for the active awareness of and engagement with the Spirit evident in the lives of African women. In this section, I present briefly the lives of four African women whose work and life exemplify the Spirit in action by fashioning new roles and identities different from those routinely foisted on them by church and society.

3.1. Marguerite Barankitse: the Value of Peace and Life

In 1993, Burundi emerged from a devastating civil war that left in its wake unimaginable social, economic, and political problems. While the focus was placed on rebuilding infrastructure and regaining a semblance of normality, one group simply went unnoticed: war orphans. Marguerite Barankitse, a Burundian, decided to do something new and creative to rebuild and restore dignity and life to the people. In a public lecture, she stated,

I come from a country—Burundi in the heart of Africa—where we experience the power of evil, of ethnic and racial hatred, of war which is a journey of no return ... We badly need a spirit of dialogue, of coexistence, of compassion, of respect for life, that unites us despite our differences, and this is what creates our harmony.³⁰⁶

Animated by this spirit of dialogue, in the smoldering throes of war and ethic

³⁰⁵ Anne Nasimiye-Wasike, “African Women’s Legitimate Role in Church Ministry” in *The Church in African Christianity: Innovative Essays in Ecclesiology*, ed. J.N.K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (Nairobi, Kenya: Initiatives Publishers, 1990), 57–70.

³⁰⁶ “Voices of Hope Africa & its Future,” public lecture by Marguerite Barankitse (Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, May 2011), https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=google&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&gws_rd=cr&ei=kllrVp-oOML1atOJniA#q=voices+of+hope%2C+Africa+and+its+future%2C+Margie+Barankitse (accessed February 12, 2016).

rivalry, Margie, as she is affectionately called, decided to found Maison Shalom (Shalom House) in 1993.³⁰⁷ Based on her description of the mission of Maison Shalom, Margie's chief goal was to restore dignity to war or AIDS orphans, street children, young children, babies in prison with their mothers, and the children of poverty-stricken parents.

Margie began with twenty-five war orphans she adopted. Over the years, the number of Margie's children has risen to more than 20,000 orphans and other needy children. She did not wait for these children to come to her; just like every compassionate mother, she knew what they needed and searched for them to bring them under her compassionate, protective, and nurturing love.

If there are children in need, surely there are mothers in need. Margie has extended her mission and ministry to mothers with nursing difficulties caused by malnutrition and poverty. She labors to create a community for children and mothers in which they can feel valued and are gradually able to rebuild self-confidence and self-reliance.

Today, the scope of Margie's vision for the children and women is extensive. Maison Shalom is now in all Burundian provinces and in its neighboring countries—Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Beyond humanitarian support, Maison Shalom offers an integrated and holistic approach to health, education, culture, justice, and income generation. The focus is on agricultural and pastoral activities, which guarantees the livelihood of over 90 percent of the population.

Margie's work has a prophetic dimension; she is not content to pick up the pieces. She understands it as her duty to call on all those involved in policy making and governance in church and society to restore dignity to women, men, and children in Burundi. Her ultimate dream is to "see every Burundian lead a decent life ... We are the builders of Hope."³⁰⁸

Margie was deeply inspired by the Spirit to found Maison Shalom, something that was not even imagined or conceived by the church or leadership of Burundi at the time of

³⁰⁷ Materials for this section are derived largely from <http://www.maisonshalom.org/en> (accessed February 12, 2016).

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

the conflict. Her desire was to restore life and dignity to the lost, broken, and rejected. She imagined a life that could change the divisions and hatred between tribes and nationalities and create a place where all were welcome and could live as one family. She wrote, “Dear friends, since its foundation, Maison Shalom was born to light the candle in the middle of the darkness; console, reconcile and restore the hope to these children who had lost everything. We refused the fratricide hatred.”³⁰⁹

3.2. Leymah Gbowee: *The Value of Justice and Peace*

Leymah Gbowee, a Liberian social activist and visionary, shot to prominence in the dark days of the Liberian civil war as vividly portrayed in the critically acclaimed and award-winning documentary *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*. The documentary features Liberian women activists advocating for peace in Liberia led by Leymah.

When war erupted in Liberia in 1989, it cut short Leymah’s dream of becoming a medical doctor. The war lasted until 1997 and left at least 200,000 people dead and hundreds of thousands displaced. Such was the enormity of the trauma that the war inflicted on innocent Liberians that she decided instead to acquire skills in trauma counseling. Her initial focus was on helping child soldiers, but the second civil war that erupted in 1999 unleashed unspeakable atrocities, that time targeting women and girls. Thousands of Liberian women and girls were sexually assaulted and raped. Many were abducted and forced into militias as sex slaves and child soldiers.

However one tells the story of conflict in Liberia, it is indisputable that the civil wars took an excruciating toll on women and children. According to the Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, during the second civil war (1999–2003), “an estimated twenty thousand child soldiers were fighting for both the rebels and the government.”³¹⁰ These young men and boys made up a sizable percentage of the rebel armies, “and their tactics ... included sexual violence ... Children were also the target of

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, *Ending Liberia’s Second Civil War: Religious Women as Peacemakers*. Case Study Series (May 2011), 3.

rape and murder.”³¹¹ As a result, there were many victims—women and children—shoved into refugee camps.³¹² The statistics of rape in the theater of Liberian civil war makes for harrowing reading. Some studies indicate that in sample pools of interviewees, as many as a third of the group of women and girls interviewed had been raped during the war. Some cases involved armed multiple attackers.³¹³

Considering that rape victims often remain silent for fear of being stigmatized, it is conceivable that the number mentioned above was even higher. Several accounts based on interviews with fighters provide evidence to conclude that “an extraordinarily high number—tens upon tens upon tens of thousands—of Liberian women were raped by rebel forces over a seven year period.”³¹⁴ Sadly, until this time, no explanation has been issued by the rebel leaders, nor has there been any further international investigation of what happened.³¹⁵ This inaction dishonors the experience of the victims and almost suppresses the reality of war rape: “It is as if tens upon tens of thousands of sadistic rape cases never occurred.”³¹⁶ Yet the testimonies of women victims of war rape cannot be suppressed.

Accounts and narratives of sexual, gender-based violence in armed conflict can be disturbing and provoke revulsion and anger. In the Liberian wars, children were forced to watch the indignities of rape meted out to parents just as husbands or fathers and mothers were forced to watch the rape of their spouses, sisters, and daughters. It was also common for the attackers to kill or maim the family members at the very instance of rape of another family member.³¹⁷

³¹¹ Ibid., 1–2.

³¹² Ibid., 4.

³¹³ Kenneth L. Cain, “The Rape of Dinah: Civil War in Liberia,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (May 1999): 275–76.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 277.

³¹⁵ Apart from the trial of Charles Taylor at The Hague for crimes he committed in Sierra Leone.

³¹⁶ Cain, “The Rape of Dinah,” 278.

³¹⁷ Cain, “The Rape of Dinah,” 277; see “Rape Counseling for an Entire Nation. Sexual

Militants or rebels who committed such atrocities tended to act in groups. The mass action provided anonymity and therefore impunity and a psychological boost to the offending male military to continue committing the atrocities.³¹⁸ Sadly, judging by the accounts and narratives, age did not seem to be a deterrent. The same rebels or soldiers who raped adult women were also known to rape elderly women as well as minors and children. It was truly harrowing for pregnant and lactating mothers.³¹⁹

During the war, rape was often used to settle scores between rival groups. Women were double victims of acts of sexual perversion and of sociological stigmatization. Having suffered the indignity of rape, many faced rejection and exclusion from their families or communities during the war and when it was over.³²⁰ In some limited instances, the experience of sexual violence served as a reason for some women to enlist in the army believing the war would afford them an opportunity to redress the wrong inflicted upon them or become a way of protecting themselves. “For many of these females, becoming a soldier was a matter of kill or be killed.”³²¹

The brutalization and assault of life in Liberia was too much for Leymah to bear. Through her courage and creativity, she mobilized Liberian women and led the Liberian

violence became a way of life in Liberia during its civil wars, with everyone—women, men, babies—victimized. Led by a feminist president, the country begins the healing process” <http://www.theroot.com/views/rape-counseling-entire-nation> (accessed February 18, 2016).

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid.; see Cassandra Clifford, “Rape as a Weapon of War and it’s Long-term Effects on Victims and Society” (A Paper to the 7th Global Conference Violence and the Contexts of Hostility Monday, 5th May-Wednesday 7th May 2008, Budapest, Hungary), 6, <http://ts-si.org/files/BMJCliffordPaper.pdf> (accessed February 18, 2016); Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL) & Editors, “Hundreds of Victims Silently Grieving: Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL)” in *What Women Do in Wartime*, ed. Meredith Turshen & Clotilde Twagiramariya (New York: Zed Books, 1998), 131–33.

³²⁰ Ibid., 281; see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/aug/02/liberia-women-rape>.

³²¹ *World of Work Magazine* 54 (August 2005), http://www.ilo.org/global/publications/magazines-and-journals/world-of-work-magazine/articles/WCMS_081362/lang--en/index.htm (accessed February 18, 2016).

Mass Action for Peace, a coalition of Christian and Muslim women who sat in public protest confronting Liberia's ruthless president and rebel warlords and even held a sex strike. Thus, out of this reprehensible situation, Liberian women were spurred on to double their attempts to be peacemakers.³²²

Tired of the rapes, killings, and mutilations that occurred during the second Liberian civil war, Leymah began to ask other women to join her in prayer. It was not long before these women began to ask Muslim women to join them in prayer as well.³²³ The movement grew, and the women developed new strategies for pursuing their agenda of ending the war:

On April 11, 2003, the official association of the women, the Women in Peacebuilding Network, presented a petition to end the war to the Monrovia city hall. Afterwards, they planted themselves in a field and protested through prayer, dancing, chanting, and singing. The women returned to the protest site each day for over a year gaining the attention of the international media and forcing Charles Taylor to meet with them.³²⁴

This was only the beginning of a new approach to warfare that challenged the justification for its prolongation at the expense of individuals, especially women and girls. Leymah and her Liberian colleagues understood the unjust consequences of war in their bodies rather than externally or abstractly.

The male belligerents were compelled to come to peace talks in Ghana where the women continuously pushed them to sign a peace agreement. At one point, the women blocked the doorways of the meeting hall not allowing the men to leave until they came to peacemaking terms. The agreement included "gender specific policies, including the participation of women in government."³²⁵ Through strength in sheer numbers, through prayer and large demonstrations, and through international media, the women were able

³²² Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, *Ending Liberia's Second Civil War*, 2.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

to “play a unique role in pressuring the belligerents toward peace.”³²⁶ The women put a face on the victims of war and made a strong case for an alternative arrangement, namely, peaceful resolution of differences between warring groups and ratifying this arrangement through a formal and binding commitment.

Their stunning success saw the overthrow of the autocratic and oppressive regime of Charles Taylor and the eventual election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa’s first female head of state. Leymah stood out of the crowd. The experience portrayed her as an international leader who changed history; it marked the vanguard of a new wave of women taking control of their political destinies around the world.³²⁷ For her work, she was globally acclaimed and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 along with compatriot Lehmah Gbowee and Tawakkol Karman of Yemen.

3.3. Angelina Atyam: The Midwife of Forgiveness and Reconciliation

The story of Angelina Atyam exemplifies the redeeming power of forgiveness. Angelina, who lives in northern Uganda, was a woman well grounded in her life as a wife, mother of three sons and three daughters, and a professional nurse-midwife. Her serene life was shockingly interrupted when her daughter, Charlotte, was abducted from St. Mary’s boarding school on October 10, 1996, along with 150 other girls by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a fundamentalist Christian guerrilla group operating in northern Uganda.³²⁸ The group systematically kidnapped young boys to train and fill its ranks and young women to serve as sex slaves. Human rights organizations estimate that as many as 30,000 children were abducted at the height of the LRA insurgency.

After the kidnapping of her daughter and the fruitless effort to get her back,

³²⁶ Ibid., 5.

³²⁷ Materials on Leymah Gbowee are drawn from <http://leymahgbowee.com/> (accessed February 24, 2016).

³²⁸ Marc Lacey, “A Mother’s Bitter Choice: Telling Kidnappers No” in *The New York Times*, January 25, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/25/world/the-saturday-profile-a-mother-s-bitter-choice-telling-kidnappers-no.html> (accessed February 27, 2016).

Angelina found a new vocation—to speak and live for others. She cofounded the Concerned Parents Association through which she became an active and vocal campaigner for the return of her daughter and all other kidnapped children. She campaigned for their return, and she worked for the rehabilitation of escaped child soldiers and reconciliation between the government and the rebels.

A few months later, Angelina was approached by two LRA members with an offer: if she would just be quiet, she could have her daughter back. She refused. She wanted the release of all children kidnapped during LRA's leader Joseph Kony's reign of terror in northern Uganda. Her mantra was "Every child is my child." In her words,

Getting my child back would be absolutely wonderful, but if I accepted the offer, I would be turning my back on all the other families. I'd destroy the new community spirit we had created—the hope of getting all the boys and girls back.³²⁹

She became a leader in the fight for all of the thousands of children who had been kidnapped.³³⁰ She organized international tours to draw attention to the atrocities happening in northern Uganda. Her main message was forgiveness and reconciliation, a message powerfully illustrated by the following account.

She continued to spread the message of forgiveness. When she learned that the well-known rebel commander Rasca Lukwiya was holding Charlotte as his "wife," Atyam went a step further. She traveled to the neighboring village where Lukwiya's mother lived, determined to convince the woman that she was ready to forgive him, his family, their clan, and their tribe, which she held responsible for beginning the civil conflict. During that visit, Atyam told Lukwiya's mother, "I know you have nothing to do with the war and want your son back." "She didn't find it very easy at first, but then we embraced and wept. We were reconciled," said Atyam, who felt as if a heavy burden was lifted from her heart and soul. "I could go back, pray, and call upon God for what I

³²⁹ <http://biography.jrank.org/pages/2895/Atyam-Angelina.html> (accessed February 27, 2016).

³³⁰ Ibid.

wanted from him.”³³¹

Atyam became “a midwife to a vision of a new future of reconciliation and peace for her country.”³³² She describes her mission:

It is a wonderful thing to be a midwife. We become part of the family. We start having a voice in somebody’s family—don’t eat this, eat that. They [the newborn babies] come, their eyes open then they yell, “I’m alive!” and that is something great. I see them with my other eyes, not X-rays! I am the grandmother of a multitude. I am colorless. Even in Indian communities I am a grandmother. So every child is my child. It gave me the foundation where to start from, the value of human life. The miracle of creating, of a new human being coming into the world.³³³

Charlotte eventually managed to escape; she returned home with her two sons born in captivity to rebel commanders. Angelina arranged for her to return to school, where she studied hospital management at the University of Health Sciences in Kampala while Angelina took care of her two grandsons.

The return of her daughter was not the end of her mission: “The war ... is still taking so many children ... What’s needed is a national reconciliation. Making peace is cheaper than buying machines and guns. In the end, with war, no one can win.”³³⁴ Angelina recognizes the difficulty of forgiving:

We have struggled to find peace in Uganda since 1996. We prefer to cling to bitterness, but bitterness is corrosive. Like a container filled with salt, it will destroy everything because the Lord cannot forgive us if we cannot forgive others. Life is wonderful if we let God heal us.³³⁵

Angelina found deep in her soul a hidden fountain that welled up in her—the waters of new life that enabled her to forgive her daughter’s captors and demand the

³³¹ <https://www.faithandleadership.com/we-forgive> (accessed February 27, 2016).

³³² Ibid.

³³³ <https://reconcilers.wordpress.com/2009/11/19/the-interruption-of-forgiveness-an-interview-with-angelina-atyam-of-uganda/> (accessed February 27, 2016).

³³⁴ <http://biography.jrank.org/pages/2895/Atyam-Angelina.html>.

³³⁵ <https://www.faithandleadership.com/we-forgive>.

release of the other children. Thus “a tragic interruption in her own life led Angelina to discover the gift of this new story.”³³⁶ Such strength, courage, and faith are essential ingredients in the process of imagining a new Africa. They contain the power to believe that self-sacrificial and life-giving love can make a difference and that new stories are possible in Africa. According to Emmanuel Katongole, “The lives and work of Angelina Atyam and [Sudanese] Bishop Taban are examples of what oases of hope look like in a broken world.”³³⁷

“Angelina, what planet are you from?” cried out a blind woman from a nearby district whose only son had been abducted. The rebels had forced the clinging eight-year-old from her arms with fire, slashed her with a machete, and left her to die. “Don’t you know what the rebels did to me?” she demanded. “Must I forgive?” Atyam’s answer was a resounding yes. Unless the parents practiced forgiveness and sought a peaceful solution to the conflict, they would destroy what they most wanted back—the children. “Bullets have no eyes,” she explained to the woman. “In the field, bullets would not know if a child was abducted or volunteered for the rebel army. War would destroy all these children.”³³⁸

3.4. Sr. Rosemary Nyirumbe: *The Value of Hospitality and Dignity*

The story of Sr. Rosemary Nyirumbe naturally follows that of Mama Angelina. As evident in the story of Charlotte, the war in Uganda brought untold misery to children, especially girls. Those who managed to escape or were released came back psychologically broken and mothers of rebel children’s soldiers. The community was not a hospitable place; not everyone was as lucky as Charlotte. The child mothers faced rejection, shame, and stigma; they were social outcasts. Their plight was a form of double victimization:

When they returned with their children to the villages they were abducted

³³⁶ Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 154.

³³⁷ A version of this story appeared in the Winter 2010 issue of *Divinity* magazine (link is external).

³³⁸ <https://www.faithandleadership.com/we-forgive>.

from, no one was there to help them. One of the main tribes in Uganda, the Acholi, traditionally considers the children property of the father, not the mother, and children by non-Acholi fathers are “deemed unworthy,” while the mothers are stigmatised as part of the rebels.³³⁹

It took the courage and ingenuity of another woman, Sr. Rosemary Nyirumbe, a trained midwife and a nurse, to make a difference. She took to the airwaves and openly announced on a local FM radio that there was a home for those girls: “I said, ‘If you have nowhere to go, you come to us, we will open the door for you, we will train you.’” She turned a local school run by her religious congregation into a vocational training school for the girls.

At St. Monica’s, the girls acquired skills in catering, sewing, and cooking. Sr. Rosemary became their mother and protector: “I developed a system that I would never go to sleep before midnight. I had to keep awake because I wanted to know that the children were safe, that everybody in the compound was safe.”³⁴⁰ More important, she helped the girls develop their maternal emotions and capabilities to accept their children born in captivity:

The only way we could make these girls not turn their anger toward these children was accepting them, loving them, and giving them skills to say, you can love these children. In a way we had to show them how to love their kids by loving these women and loving their children—we offered to be mothers to them, so they could care for their children.³⁴¹

Though Angelina’s and Sr. Rosemary’s stories have become widely known, it was the story of the boys that first captured the world’s media attention. The story of the boy soldiers of Uganda and South Sudan was popularized through the movie *The Lost Boys*, but the girls were invisible. The absence of reference to “lost girls” is yet another evidence of a pattern of gender disparity in the recognition and appreciation of the worth and value of women. As Sr. Rosemary narrates:

³³⁹ <http://www.eyeforfilm.co.uk/feature/2014-02-03-interview-with-sister-rosemary-nyirumbe-about-sewing-hope-feature-story-by-anne-katrin-titze> (accessed February 28, 2016).

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

I have not heard the term *lost girls*. Why are people not talking about the girls? Why are we not caring for them? These girls don't have the opportunity the boys have simply because they have the scar that will follow them—and that scar is their babies, their children. These girls need support and education. They are the future of the nation. If nothing is done for them, what has happened in the past can still be repeated—these are going to be bitter women. That is why I took up the skills training, to let society understand that these women are the greatest contributing factor to the economy of the country. They are giving hope to these kids. They are giving hope to the nation.³⁴²

For her effort, Sr. Rosemary was named a CNN Hero in 2007, and her story is told in the movie *Sewing Hope*. Her message is striking:

We are here preaching the gospel of presence ... I say, use your needle, use your hand, sew away the pain, sew away anything people will say about you. People may call you a failure, but you're not. People may call you a rebel, but you're not—you're a human being.³⁴³

4. Gifts of the Spirit: Maternal Values of African Women

In the preceding section, I presented the lives of four African women whose work and life exemplify the Spirit in action fashioning new roles and identities. More important, these new roles and identities are founded on and reveal maternal values. In their respective contexts, the women are birthing new life that is a manifestations of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In the rest of this chapter, I will explore these values and gifts and the correlation between them.

This reminder from Bernhard Blankenhorn is important to begin the section:

In the *Summa Theologiae* (henceforth cited as *ST*), Aquinas begins his study of the Spirit's seven gifts by paying close attention to the language of Isaiah 11. He notes that the prophet does not really speak about gifts but about spirits: "the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and fortitude" and so on. Aquinas rightly thinks that this choice of words was deliberate. The word "spirit" or "inspiration" signifies motion coming from the outside (*ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 1c). While Thomas did not know Hebrew, in fact, the Hebrew language supports his analysis of the Latin term very well: spirit or *Ruah* means breath or wind. Wind is a motion that

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ <http://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201403/sewing-hope-sister-rosemary-nyirumbe-28614> (accessed February 28, 2016).

comes to us from elsewhere.³⁴⁴

According to Blankenhorn, “Thomas’ theology is especially beautiful because, inspired by St. Augustine, it connects each of the gifts with the virtues and the beatitudes.”³⁴⁵ Furthermore notes Blankenhorn, “The Catechism only lists the seven gifts, but does not explain what the individual gifts mean. However, it does describe the overall nature of the gifts in a way similar to Aquinas.”³⁴⁶ We find this description of the nature of the gifts in no. 1830 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “the gifts of the Holy Spirit ... are permanent dispositions which make man docile in following the promptings of the Holy Spirit.”³⁴⁷

As mentioned, the traditional understanding of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is that they are seven: wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord. In many ways and in various circumstances of their lives, all seven gifts are apparent among the African women whose beautiful lives and inspiring ministries I explored in the preceding section. I have selected four of the traditional gifts of the Spirit—wisdom, counsel, fortitude, and piety—that illustrate in particular and unique ways how African women enrich the community called church with maternal roles and identities. It is clear from the preceding section that there are other gifts of the Spirit these women bring: joy, sacredness of life, hospitality, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace.

The Gift of Wisdom

According to Albert Haase and Bridget Haase,

Wisdom ... satisfies our appetite for the things of God but also nourishes and expands it. One knows God as one knows a beloved spouse—not as a

³⁴⁴ Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP, “The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit,” Sunday Adult Education Forum at Blessed Sacrament Parish, March 18, 2007, <http://www.blessed-sacrament.org/formation.html> (accessed January 20, 2016).

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a7.htm (accessed November 2, 2016).

chapter in a history book, but as flesh and blood. Indeed, the Christian experiences God in the spouse.³⁴⁸

The traditional understanding of this gift is found in 1 Corinthians 2:9–10:

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

This gift is evident in many ways in the lives and activities of African women.

As the four women demonstrate, African women have a great depth of the knowledge of God in their lives and can be sources of strength to recreate their communities and societies especially in times of crisis and brokenness. Their gift of wisdom is clearly manifested in their potential and ability for leading their communities to new life-giving ways of relating and confronting challenges. These four women, though with little or no formal theological education, engage in roles that come across as a true manifestation and presence of God.

The church would be much enriched if African women were accorded the opportunity of leadership roles in the community. They are gifted with a profound sense of God and communion with others that, according to African-American womanist theologian Shawn Copeland, finds its foundation in

the gift of God's loving Spirit [who] creates a new basis for community. Women and men experience themselves as transformed persons who are called to live out this gift of love concretely through transformed human relations and who are knit together and empowered by the same Spirit to witness to a new reality.³⁴⁹

The gift of wisdom is manifested and reflected in the lives of Margie, Leymah,

³⁴⁸ Albert Haase and Bridget Haase, *Enkindled: Holy Spirit, Holy Gifts* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2000), 16–17.

³⁴⁹ M. Shawn Copeland, "Knit Together by the Spirit as Church" in *Prophetic Witness: Catholic Women's Strategies for Reform*, ed. Colleen M. Griffith (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 16.

Angelina, and Rosemary, each of whom decided during a time of crisis to initiate a course of action aimed at creating a new society in which human dignity was recovered, renewed, and restored. Margie's response to war was shalom—peace and life; Leymah's was justice—peace; Angelina's was forgiveness—reconciliation, and Rosemary's hospitality—dignity. These are eminently and profoundly gifts of the Spirit.

The Gift of Counsel

In many African communities in contrast to cultures in the West, the person is a member of the community first and an individual second. One's identity is found through the clan and the extended family. The individual's energies must be dedicated first to the common good of the group.³⁵⁰ A Tswana (Botswana) proverb says, "A person is a person through other people"³⁵¹ ("*Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" or "*Motho ke motho ka batho*"). With this kind of thinking, as the narratives of the four women show, African women are gifted with a deep sense of bonding for the community; they know of no other way of existence. They seem to carry in their being the gift of counsel because "the gift of counsel suggests interdependence, interrelatedness, and interconnectedness."³⁵² Perhaps if the early missionaries to Africa had begun their missionary enterprise on the basis of "the value and goodness of *anthropos*, the human person,"³⁵³ they would have noticed that African people possess the gift in their existence and culture. One of the consequences would have been an attempt to "understand more clearly the web of human relationships and meanings that make up human culture and in which God is present, offering life, healing and wholeness."³⁵⁴ This understanding evokes the gift of counsel that "helps us to make decisions properly and wisely."³⁵⁵ More specifically, counsel opens us to the Spirit as we reflect, discern, consult, and advise in situations that have to

³⁵⁰ Healey and Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, 106–7.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁵² Goergen, *Fire of Love*, 142.

³⁵³ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 55.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁵ Haase and Haase, *Enkindled: Holy Spirit, Holy Gifts*, 34.

do with teaching or taking specific actions.

As Mitch Finley points out, the gift of counsel is vital to discerning how to apply or live out our relationship with Christ in specific contexts.³⁵⁶ This gift is very relational; it has to be practiced in community. Many African women know and understand the value of consulting with others and getting advice and guidance to make right decisions or judgments. More important, they know how to consult with the spirits, ancestors, and elders in the community; they would not be African otherwise.

Narratives of many African women echo their cry and yearning for spiritual guidance, companionship, and friendship. They desire that the church community play such a role for its members, especially their families. As Goergen rightly observes,

Counsel suggests the value of a spiritual community ... spiritual companionship and spiritual friendship. Those with whom we associate are a part of who we are, and we become like those with whom we connect. Thus, “community” is a dimension of the gift of counsel.³⁵⁷

If they were acknowledged as equals in a highly patriarchal society, African women could share this gift of counsel by teaching with their lives and communicating their wisdom, knowledge, and understanding with others who form the same spiritual and ecclesial community.

This gift is highly exhibited in the lives of Margie, Leymah, Angelina, and Rosemary; community is very important for each of them. Without exception, each went beyond the ethnic strife, war, and division to bring warring and broken lives together to form and live in a community of peace, justice, dignity, hospitality, and reconciliation. Each succeeded because of her ability to use the gift of counsel, the gift that is always drawn toward community, toward accepting and sharing of life with the other. Each woman embodied relationality at its core on which is founded a renewed community.

³⁵⁶ Mitch Finley, *The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri Publications, 2001), 34.

³⁵⁷ Goergen, *Fire of Love*, 142-143.

The Gift of Fortitude

Of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the gift of fortitude is the one that is most commonly thought of and, frequently, the most underappreciated ... fortitude is also one of the cardinal virtues. In this case, a gift is also a virtue.³⁵⁸

As the narratives of the four women in the preceding section demonstrate, African women never give up in the face of myriad challenges and difficulties of daily living in church and society no matter how intractable they seem because they are endowed with the gift of courage, of fortitude. “The gift of fortitude is the capacity to remain firm in hope against all pressures, even death.”³⁵⁹

The gift of fortitude or spiritual and physical courage runs deep in the lives of African women. Margie’s, Leymah’s, Angelina’s, and Rosemary’s narratives are stories of courage and fortitude. They have the ability to hold on to the end. It takes courage to be a pioneer of something new under extremely challenging and dangerous circumstances as their lives demonstrate.

One of the dimensions of this gift is creativity; African women can be very creative. They can take risks and initiatives not knowing what they will encounter in embarking on life-giving ventures much less how things will turn out for them. Margie, Leymah, and Angelina risked their lives to bring warring communities together. Rosemary taught the community the spirit of hospitality. They all persevered in spite of all odds with a firm faith that God would not fail them. Courage is not a me-centered gift; rather, it has to do with being connected with God. It has to do with being an instrument of loving energy through which God can work. Courage enables the courageous to surrender her desires to God. A much greater power animated by the Spirit of God takes over,³⁶⁰ and community and society begin to transform.

³⁵⁸ Finley, *The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, 49.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Goergen, *Fire of Love*, 141.

The Gift of Piety

The gift of piety ignites the fires of the spiritual life. It is the spark that comes out of nowhere and sets a person ablaze with love—love of God and love of neighbor ... Piety is the womb of compassion ... Piety quenches the “spirit of slavery” ... and enkindles within us the “spirit of adoption” that knows and experiences God as ‘Abba!’ (see Romans 8:15).³⁶¹

With the gift of piety, we open like flowers to the warmth of God’s love. We know beyond any doubt how precious we are to God. We become able to throw away our anxieties and fears. We abandon ourselves into the hands of the living God. Our need for prayer becomes a thirst. We know that “all things work together unto good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28).³⁶²

This trusting religious outlook is what sustains the spiritual lives of many African women. They live their lives in prayer and communion with others. This turning outward to others in the context of prayer drives many African women to participate in devotional groups and pious associations in church.

A common trait of the spirituality of African Catholic women is their devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Orobator asserts,

Devotion to Mary has caught on like bushfire in the harmattan across the Catholic landscape in Africa. Countless Marian devotional groups exist in Catholic parishes, groups such as the Legion of Mary, the Confraternity of the Most Holy Rosary, the Block Rosary Society, and so on.³⁶³

Such devotions help strengthen the faith of the individual especially in the context of oppression, where patriarchy overwhelms equal freedom of expressions of faith through leadership.

Leymah is Lutheran; Margie, Angelina, and Rosemary, who are Catholics, show in their narratives an explicit devotion to Mary. This devotional practice is part of what has sustained many African women as they form community, support, and friendship

³⁶¹ Haase and Haase, *Enkindled: Holy Spirit, Holy Gifts*, 46.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 46–47.

³⁶³ Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 94.

with their counterparts who partake in the devotions. These Marian devotions form the bedrock of the spirituality of many African Catholic women. They meet Jesus in his mother and are comforted in their struggles and trials. Mary, Mother of Sorrows (Our Lady of Sorrows) becomes their patron. Catholic women in Africa “believe that Mary knows what it takes to be a mother in Africa.”³⁶⁴ She has had the experiences that women have suffered such as bearing a child in pitiless poverty, the possibility of losing a child as it is being brought into the world, the merciless life as she tries to raise a child by herself, and the possibility of losing that child to starvation.³⁶⁵ “Mary or Mama Maria, as they prefer to call her, could have been an African mother.”³⁶⁶ In the words of Elizabeth Johnson, Mary is truly a sister to African women.³⁶⁷

Goergen makes the point,

We are not only servants of God, or daughters and sons of God, but we become friends of God through the gift of piety. Piety is filial but is it also friendship, as when we become friends with the mother or father whose daughters and sons we remain. Piety puts us in touch with the maternal side of God, God as mother.³⁶⁸

And quoting Julian of Norwich, he continues: “As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother.”³⁶⁹ Just as Mary began her journey into God at the time of the Annunciation, so we too begin our journey into God when we join with Mary in her relationship with her Son Jesus Christ in the Spirit of God. In our Christian lives, we live the gift of piety by immersing ourselves in a single-hearted devotion to Jesus Christ through Mama Maria, understanding the meaning of our lives in Christ.³⁷⁰ Like Mary, we

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 94-95.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (London: Continuum, 2003).

³⁶⁸ Goergen, *Fire of Love*, 140–41.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 141.

³⁷⁰ Antoine Nacheff, *Mary's Pope: John Paul II, Mary, and the Church since Vatican II* (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2000), 122.

are guided by the Spirit of God to say yes in freedom to God's plan for each of us.

African Catholic women are able to relate with the belief that Mary, even though human, prayed constantly and as such was open to God's purpose in her life.

Mary had to entrust herself to the angel's words at the Annunciation and renew that trust with awareness of the difficulties inherent in the limitations of human nature. The paradox of faith that consists in recognizing as truthful the things that are hoped for was an authentic quality of Mary's ongoing experience of God.³⁷¹

This gift of piety is an attractive gift of African women as we see in the lives of Leymah, Margie, Angelina, and Rosemary.

The Gift of the Fear of the Lord

Haase and Haase explain that the use of the word *fear* in this gift's name causes us to misunderstand its meaning. Far from being afraid of God, the true meaning has to do with awe, fascination, and wonder in the presence of God. It does in a word establish our right relationship with God—that of creature to Creator, “individually noticed and loved by the Creator.”³⁷²

This experience resonates strongly with the widely held belief in African religious traditions that there is no experience untouched by God's love. As mentioned above, in this worldview, there is great reverence for God, who is perceived as a fathomless but palpable Spirit. We feel the wind though it is invisible. We see the effects of this Presence.³⁷³

Margie, Leymah, Angelina, and Rosemary are faith-filled women. At the center of their lives is God, who called them and urged them on in the power of the Spirit. They believe that they have a responsibility to respond to God with reverence, respect, and lives rooted in the Spirit. Love of God is love of the poor, marginalized, excluded, oppressed, and impoverished. Their ministry is a clear demonstration of the Spirit at work in the margins and peripheries of church and society. In this context, their capacity to turn

³⁷¹ Ibid., 123.

³⁷² Haase and Haase, *Enkindled: Holy Spirit, Holy Gifts*, 52–53.

³⁷³ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (New York: Praeger, 1975), 53.

over their entire beings to God in awe, wonder, and praise is an invigorating and belief-inducing gift that causes others to want to do the same.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how women are creating identities and roles beyond those defined in terms of motherhood and how maternal values continue to shape and inform those identities and roles. Rather than treat these values as isolated acts of heroism, I have situated them in the context of the Pentecost to show they are gifts of the Spirit of God that speak in concrete terms to the church.

Margie, Leymah, Angelina, and Rosemary embody new roles and identities as well as manifest profoundly maternal values akin to the gifts of the Spirit. They are writing new narratives with their lives beyond what religion and culture assigns them via the narrow lens of motherhood. The stories embodied and exemplified in their lives invite the church in Africa to choose life by opening itself to the gifts within. For the church, accepting this “commitment to a new future in Africa”³⁷⁴ means accepting the talents and abilities that women can and are offering on the continent. The gifts that African women bring to church and society are not exhibited in speculative disquisitions; African women narrate stories of new life and new beginnings here and now.

Thus the new narratives generated by Margie, Leymah, Angelina, and Rosemary are not built on structures of power and control but on the raw stories of their and their communities’ experiences of rupture and redemption, pain and joy, death and life. In her own unique way, each woman is a midwife of new horizons defined by justice, peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, dignity, and hospitality. These women challenge the story of the church in which women are being excluded because of their gender instead of being admitted on the merits of their gifts, which are vital to the advent of God’s reign. The early Christians community operated in the Spirit and welcomed the gifts of the Spirit active in all members of the community. Women and men exercised their pastoral and spiritual gifts accordingly as teachers, preachers, visionaries, prophets, healers, exorcists,

³⁷⁴ Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 101.

and community leaders. Exercising these gifts had little to do with gender.³⁷⁵

The maternal gifts Margie, Leymah, Angelina, and Rosemary bring are for the flourishing of the church and the society.

There is an urgency in this regard, especially at it relates to African women. As Benedict XIV has said, the Church and society need women to take their full place in the world, so that the human race can live in the world without completely losing its humanity.³⁷⁶

For this to become a reality, our first step is to recognize and honor the humanity of each person created in the image and likeness of God and see the other as sister or brother (Matthew 5:21–22) in the way these four women do. This insight originates from the profound womb of women’s suffering and love, despair and hope, pain and joy.

In the next chapter, I will explore Christian traditions and biblical sources to ground this multifaceted experience of women in the reality of the divine.

³⁷⁵ Anne Arabome, “Gender and Ecclesiology: Authorities, Structures, Ministries,” *Concilium* 4 (2012): 115.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

Chapter 4

When a Sleeping Woman Wakes Up: Critical and Creative Retrieval of Historical and Biblical Resources

My African experience has taught me that the biblical characters shift and change with time so that what were “foolish Galatians” (Gal. 3:1) may be “savage Africans,” in one context and time, and something else in another; moreover, that such labels have an adverse impact upon those tagged with them.³⁷⁷

Introduction

In the previous chapters, I have focused on describing and analyzing the conditions of some women in Africa and the factors, practices, and situations that shape their existence. In chapter 3, we saw four models of women who embody and manifest the gifts of the Spirit in their ordinary existence that presage the gifts they offer to church and society. Those concrete examples and models offered portraits of heroic acts and lives that witness to new paradigms and narratives of self-worth and self-definition in the face of entrenched cultural, religious, and social biases. Just as in chapter 2, in chapter 3 in clear and unambiguous terms, we saw several African women who created and exemplify identities and roles beyond those defined in narrow biological terms of motherhood.

The focus of this chapter is twofold. In light of preceding chapters, the first objective is to reconsider certain roles and identities relative to African women from a historical perspective. To achieve this goal, I will focus on biblical resources that allow us to reconstruct images of women liberated from oppression and subjugation in the doctrine and practices of the patriarchal church.

In the second phase, to further concretize this experience, I will focus on the narratives of three women (and one man) in John’s gospel as illustrations of the new image, identity, and status open to African women in the same way that I used Pentecost

³⁷⁷ Musa W. Dube, “Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible” in *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women’s Theology*, ed. Kwok Pui-lan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 91.

as a paradigm in chapter 3 and the Christological foundations and warrants that support the emergence of this new image, identity, and status.

This narrative, historical-biblical approach is important for multiple reasons. First, from what I have presented so far, it is clear that scripture is a common source of reference for those who authoritatively claim to speak on behalf of women or to define the nature and place of women in church and society. The patriarchal pastime of putting women in their place easily but erroneously seeks and claims justification in scripture. Second, people who are theologically illiterate and devoid of the tools of critical interpretation of biblical resources and traditions easily acquiesce in this process of misinterpreting scripture to the detriment of women. Third, the authority of scripture works both ways: just as it has been used to demean and undermine the dignity of women, we can also look to it to achieve the opposite—to affirm and honor their intrinsic worth and inalienable dignity.

Narrative or storytelling is important for this third component. As Musa Dube observes on the importance of the narrative approach to scripture,

Retelling a biblical story by including listeners who through comments and participation, take a fixed story and make it open for continuous and fresh retelling. The author either can create the characters or invite colleagues or a community of interpreters to a participatory retelling.³⁷⁸

This chapter's aim furthers the overall goal of this study to identify and bring to the surface the unique gifts I have seen several African women develop and the theological and cultural underpinnings as well as further dimensions of their gifts I have explored so far in this dissertation. Through this analysis, we will further distill unique elements, qualities, and images of maternal leadership and the symbolic significance of motherhood untrammelled by a fixation on the biological and the patriarchal domination of women.

³⁷⁸ Musa W. Dube, "Introduction," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W. Dube (Atlanta and Geneva: Society of Biblical Literature and WCC Publications, 2001), 4.

1. Peering through History and Searching the Scriptures

“You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life” (John 5:39). Trying to retrieve information that supports the role of women in history generally and in scripture particularly is a daunting task if for no other reason than the nature of scripture. We are dealing with a complex document that encompasses a world far removed from ours yet still relevant for setting ethical principles, social norms, practical guidelines, and doctrinal criteria in the life of the Christian community.

As Carol Meyers pointed out in her study of the life of women in the time of the Hebrew Bible, the text presents problems for anyone who holds the common assumption that “it is full of data that can be used to reconstruct patterns of daily life in biblical times, especially relating to women.”³⁷⁹ Unsurprisingly, a significant part of the problem stems from the gender bias that underlies the biblical narratives. To imagine the feminine in God through the written text of men is a challenge. Meyers is quite categorical:

The Bible as a whole is androcentric, or male-centered, in its subject matter, its authorship, and its perspectives. One example of how it focuses far more on men than women is in the simple matter of personal names. The Hebrew Bible mentions a total of 1,426 names, of which 1,315 are those of men. Thus, only 111 women’s names appear, about 9 percent of the total. The enormous gap between the number of women’s and of men’s names signals the male-centered concerns of the biblical literature.³⁸⁰

I will return to this issue in this chapter when dealing with the narrative of the woman at the well in John. For now, it suffices to mention that as it was in the past, so it is in the present. The synod on the family (2014–2015), which I have already mentioned, had slightly under 300 active male participants with the right to vote on policies and amendments of policies and texts relative to women’s life in marriage, family, and their reproductive rights, but only a meager number of disenfranchised women were allowed into the aula of the synod.

³⁷⁹ Carol L. Meyers, “Everyday Life Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (London: SPCK, 1992), 251.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 251–52.

The relegation of women to obscurity has precedence in the scripture. The upshot, as Meyers shows, is that “clearly it is difficult to use scripture alone in order to see the everyday lives of women in the biblical past.”³⁸¹ In terms of gender interaction in the biblical past, we need to consider other valuable sources outside scripture. This is not to suggest that such interactions are absent; my point is that it is an exercise fraught with challenges and setbacks. To take but one example,

There has been much debate in biblical scholarship about the legal relationship between women and men as married couples ... Were women the property of their husbands? Were they mere chattel to be disposed? Did male heads of household have unmitigated control over female family members? The patrilineal structure of Israelite society, the fact that men controlled most economic assets, and the way women appear as dependents in many legal contexts—all these factors make such questions valid. Yet it is not simple to answer them.³⁸²

There is no simple answer available to scholars from the biblical past. For the following analysis, it is important to note some critical principles or points of emphasis. First, as Africans and as women from diverse cultures and backgrounds and considering our experiences of oppressive and marginalizing patriarchy both in theological scholarship and doctrinal disquisitions, some women theologians in Africa take a critical stance vis-à-vis the Bible. To recall an African proverb, “Eneke the bird says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, it has learnt to fly without perching.” The fact that official biblical exegesis and hermeneutics continue to be skewed by patriarchal proclivities no matter how subtle stirs a hermeneutical suspicion among women theologians. Over the centuries, too many men have appealed to scripture to define the place of women in church and society, and more and more women are learning to evade this trap and develop their own understanding of biblical resources and traditions. Kwok Pui-lan makes this point clearly using the example of polygamy:

The multiple identities of women enable them to maintain a critical distance when reading the Bible. As oppressed women, they interpret the Bible differently from oppressed men ... In Africa, there are men who try

³⁸¹ Ibid., 252.

³⁸² Ibid.

to keep the polygamous tradition as “the touchstone of genuine indigenization” of Christianity into Africa. But many African women strongly object to polygamy based on their rereading of the biblical stories on polygamous marriages ... The Bible itself is a document of multiplicity and plurality. Women with multiple identities appropriate it in a multidimensional and multilayered way. It is like many mirrors with varied sizes and surfaces assembled at angles to one another, creating and reflecting images in different directions and proportions. There is infinite potential in such fascinating reading and rereading.³⁸³

Women in Africa must look to the scriptures for guidance and to the depths of buried African cultures in which women had important and eminent roles and positions in society even though the patriarchal elements tried to eliminate those roles by their domination, manipulation, and control.

Third World women and minority women focus on the multiple oppression of women in the Bible because these stories speak to their reality and shed light on their existence, but their concern is not just limited to the texts on women or on marginalized women in particular. They seek to use these specific texts to uncover the interlocking oppression of racism, classism, and sexism in the past and in the present, thereby helping all of us to liberate ourselves from bondage.³⁸⁴

Second, like theology, scripture is a mine of symbolic creation, production, and transmission of meaning shaped by the context and surrounding culture. As I have consistently argued in this thesis, such context and culture carry entrenched biases that have been the particular focus of gender studies in quest of a deconstruction of distorted contextual and cultural foundations. On this point, Ivone Gebara’s observation is apropos:

We know how widely the symbolic world of Christianity, and particularly of published theology, is dominated by male symbols. From this point of view, theology in all its aspects becomes a privileged place of action in view of a revolution in symbolism. Thus feminist theologians work to

³⁸³ Kwok Pui-lan, “Racism and Ethnocentrism in Feminist Biblical Interpretation” in *Searching the Scriptures*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 112.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

deconstruct patriarchal theology and to build a more inclusive theology. The weight of cultural mores is beginning slowly to be weakened by feminist theories and particularly by analyses based on gender.³⁸⁵

In light of this, African women theologians also find themselves on a quest to deconstruct gender-biased theological and ethical constructs in their desire to construct a holistic and inclusive framework. African women theologians

wish to develop a biblical hermeneutics that addresses the liberation of all peoples, and not women alone. This concern should be shared by all biblical scholars, and men and women reading the Bible for insights. Everyone should participate in the search for a liberating hermeneutics from one's particular social and historical location, while listening to the voices of others. It is morally dubious and intellectually dishonest to wait until the most oppressed women speak out and then appropriate their ideas and insights for one's own consumption.³⁸⁶

In keeping with this awareness, I will approach the narratives I will analyze in this chapter as symbolic productions subject to multiple interpretations particularly from the perspective of women's multiple identities and diverse experiences detailed in preceding chapters.

Third, it bears repeating that from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible and its interpretation have been the preserve of mainly men. We need not be biblical or theological scholars to see the evidence of this. Teresa Okure points out one such obvious example:

In examining the story of Eve, we discovered that certain elements in the biblical accounts have been either misinterpreted over the centuries or simply ignored. For the Bible is a patriarchal book not only because it was written by men (and for the most part for men), but because over the centuries it has been interpreted almost exclusively by men. Yet the human race is composed of male and female, each with its own distinctive way of perceiving reality. There is therefore an urgent need to correct the imbalance and impoverishment of Scripture caused by this one-sided interpretation by bringing to bear a feminine perspective in the

³⁸⁵ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 69.

³⁸⁶ Pui-lan, "Racism and Ethnocentrism in Feminist Biblical Interpretation," 113.

interpretation of Scripture.³⁸⁷

For the most part, the Bible was written by men for men and by extension aimed to control the lives of women.

1.2. Looking beyond the Text

In chapter 2, I presented the life of Toyin Saraki, a Nigerian woman who has dedicated her life to addressing the challenges and problems related to maternal well-being in Africa. Saraki possesses an indomitable determination to reduce and eventually bring to an end the high rate of infant mortality in Nigeria. She also spearheads a program whereby midwives receive training to help mothers during pregnancy and childbirth.

In my quest to reflect theologically on the use of scripture, I have become more and more frustrated by the lack of references to this very important aspect of the human life and condition. What I have discovered in this frustration is the sad fact that the Bible is not actually the most favorable place to find stories that are truly relatable to the real experiences of women. This personal experience and various examples buttress the foregoing points that scripture unfolds and develops in a patently androcentric world.

Scripture was written and translated by men who were convinced they were under divine inspiration even when their production created and perpetrated injustice against women. How do we relate the stories of women with the tradition of the scriptures or retrieve from scriptures stories, narratives, and symbols that validate the humanity, equality, and dignity of women? This is a daunting task because

the Christian narrative has been distorted by an over-emphasis on a particular form of rationality associated with the values and projections of a Western male elite, which has left women and non-Western cultures in positions of silence and marginality in relation to the dominant trends of history.³⁸⁸

³⁸⁷ Teresa Okure, "Women in the Bible" in Fabella and Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion*, 55–56.

³⁸⁸ Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2007), 126.

It is not my intention in this chapter to wade into the debate on scriptural canonicity. The key point I will underline here in keeping with my line of argumentation is twofold. At face value, we miss the prophetic and liberationist dimensions of the scripture in what concerns the role and significance of women. Such dimensions are suppressed or occluded by interpretations or hermeneutical slants that portray women in a negative light. From this follows a multitude of scripture-based gender injustice in church and society including the warped reading of scripture that promotes the inferiority of women and their marital subjugation to men, imposed silence, and the denial of their authority to teach, preach, and lead. Generations of church fathers later extended and deepened the historical and doctrinal reach of this bias.³⁸⁹

Notwithstanding the formidable blocks and obstacles women face, several remain relentless in their effort to open new pathways and inroads into the true and liberating meaning of the Word of God. In so doing, these women are following the wise counsel of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who feels it is a matter exegetical necessity to

develop critical-historical methods for feminist readings of the biblical texts. If the silence about women's historical and theological experience and contribution in the early Christian movement is generated by historical texts and theological redactions, then we must find ways to break the silence of the text and derive meaning from androcentric historiography and theology.³⁹⁰

This implies querying more critically what is reported as data, fact, and eyewitness accounts and reaching deep into the loud silence that wishes away the presence and active participation of women in the gospels. This call is only now being heeded by African women theologians. In this vein, many African women and

Asians are trying now to reinterpret the Scriptures and are reworking the text with inclusive language and meaning. The way we interpret things and the way we formulate our language definitely have an impact on the way we live, for this is how our consciousness and conviction are

³⁸⁹ Ruether, "Oppressive Aspects of Christianity," 94–95.

³⁹⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 41.

developed.³⁹¹

Aware of the way the Bible has been used to create traditions that militate against or undermine the status, freedom, and dignity of women, African theologians are challenging the regnant exegesis that facilely conflate gospel and culture. According to Okure,

Rereading the Bible as a patriarchal book demands that sustained efforts be made to discern between the divine and the human elements in it. For while the former embodies timeless truth for our salvation, the latter inculcates practices that are socio-culturally conditioned, hence inapplicable universally.³⁹²

As African women reread the Bible, they generate their own stories and narratives. To recall Dube's argument, using the narrative or storytelling method has important advantages,³⁹³ and Helen Bruch Pearson concurs. "Hearing and telling the stories about women, stories we have inherited from the biblical tradition of the Old and New Testaments" generates an awareness of "empowerment" embedded in these stories. Ultimately, Jesus' teaching and interaction with women "will begin to reform and transform who we are as members of the body of Christ."³⁹⁴

There is a certain comprehensive quality to storytelling and narratives of women experiences—their dying and their living. According to Beattie, paying critical attention to the whole of their lives "means listening to women's stories, allowing them to narrate their lives in ways that express their desires and hopes, their struggles and sorrows."³⁹⁵

³⁹¹ Christine Tse, "New Ways of Being Church" in Fabella and Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion*, 95.

³⁹² Pui-lan, "Racism and Ethnocentrism in Feminist Biblical Interpretation," 102.

³⁹³ Dube, "Introduction," 4.

³⁹⁴ Helen Bruch Pearson, *Do Whatever You Have the Power to Do: Studies of Six New Testament Women* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1992), 13.

³⁹⁵ Tina Beattie, "Maternal Well-Being in Sub-Saharan Africa: From Silent Suffering to Human Flourishing" in *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (New York: Orbis, 2016), 188.

The church has not always listened to women's stories and narratives. One of my main arguments in this chapter is that this pathological condition of ecclesiastical deafness is partly a manifestation of the skewed reading of the Bible, itself a form of deafness to what the Spirit is saying to the church (see Revelation 2:29). Such reading tended toward writing women out of history, silencing their voices, or misrepresenting their true identities and value in church and society.

On the contrary, what we see is a preoccupation or obsession with women's sexuality to the detriment of their gifts as *imago Dei* by male theologians and exegetes in the church, scripture, history, and tradition. From the woman at the well to the woman who lost a coin and the one who offered two copper coins, women were not often named in the history of the early Christian churches though they sponsored, organized, and led house churches. "The gospel truth is that the activity of women in the life and ministry of Jesus was much more dramatic and vital that many Christians are yet willing to recognize."³⁹⁶ New Testament examples are numerous; they form a litany of courageous, resilient, and compassionate women. As Pearson notes, "We have no name with which to call many of them, but their name is Every Woman."³⁹⁷

In the following section, using my preferred narrative approach, I will retrieve the stories of three women—Mary of Nazareth, Mary Magdalene, and the Samaritan woman—and one man—Nicodemus. My aim is to hold them up as mirrors that reflect the theological, spiritual, and maternal depth and leadership discernable in so many African women who themselves experience namelessness, invisibility, and silence in church and society.

John offers a unique perspective on dominant patriarchal and discriminatory attitudes in the Christian community that is not confined to his community but continues to manifest itself in the ways in which gender relationships are perceived and constructed in the present church. This perspective broadens the conversations in this present chapter as well as in preceding chapters about what women represent in the church in Africa. It allows us to retrieve significant nuggets of their wisdom and gifts the church of today

³⁹⁶ Pearson, *Do Whatever You Have the Power to Do*, 15.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

needs to be whole and authentic.³⁹⁸ Though I will be dealing with scriptural material, I do not approach this task in a purely exegetical manner. My interest is more practical: I want to discover some pertinent aspects of the story, humanity, status, and role of our ancestors in the faith.

2. Mary—Not behind the Throne

In this section, I focus on the pericope of the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–12), where Mary of Nazareth made her maiden appearance in John as “the mother of Jesus” (v. 1). In keeping with my preferred methodology of a narrative approach to scripture, I ask, what new possibilities of interpretation might we find in this story to illustrate and validate this thesis’s central theme of maternal leadership? How can we demonstrate the transformation of Mary from being considered simply a biological mother to assuming her role and asserting her voice as a proclaimer of the good news and a disciple? The body of literature on Mary in the scripture and in Christian tradition is vast, but some introductory remarks based on a sample of studies will set the stage for my analysis and discussion.

In general, feminist theologians agree with Schüssler Fiorenza, who contends that in theological tradition including scriptural hermeneutics, Mary has characteristically been ideologized and mythologized beyond recognition. This disfigurement has been reinforced by centuries of popular devotion and pious movements.³⁹⁹ For many, as Elizabeth Watson points out, Mary is “the woman of the little statues in gardens, with the half-smile and outstretched arms, dressed in blue.”⁴⁰⁰ The cumulative result is a “Malestream Mariology and cult of Mary” that devalue[s] women in three ways: first, by emphasizing virginity to the detriment of sexuality; second, by unilaterally associating

³⁹⁸ See Raymond Brown, “Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel,” *Theological Studies* 36, no. 4 (December 1, 1975): 688–99, at 689.

³⁹⁹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Mariam’s Child and Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 164 ff.

⁴⁰⁰ Elizabeth G. Watson, *Wisdom’s Daughters: Stories of Women around Jesus* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2009), 155.

the ideal of “true womanhood” with motherhood; and, third, by religiously valorizing obedience, humility, passivity, and submission as the cardinal virtues of women.⁴⁰¹

Drawing on Schüssler Fiorenza’s proposal of a Mariological discourse that is situated within, proceeds with, and understands itself in terms of feminist critique, it is possible to reconstruct the narrative of Mary as a powerful exemplar of motherhood liberated from the shackles of mainstream ideology and mythology that have confined her to the straightjacket of domination and biological motherhood.⁴⁰² This narrative, however, need not be constrained by or forced into a dichotomy of Mariology from below vs. Mariology from above. In keeping with the focus of this thesis, the critical element in this discourse is to construct a narrative that is faithful to the humanity and maternal leadership of Mary yet able to liberate her from the mythologizing and ideologizing approaches to biological motherhood.

Many paths are possible depending on the narrative of Mary that one focuses on in the scripture. For the purposes of this thesis, the wedding at Cana offers us one significant narrative that allows us to uncover and affirm Mary’s agency as a disciple and the centrality of her leadership role in the unfolding mission and ministry of Jesus.

2.1. Nonsilence in Cana

As Tikva Frymer-Kensky points out as being the case of many women in the Bible, the portrait of Mary in John—as in other evangelists—is strikingly, frustratingly, and infuriatingly incomplete.⁴⁰³ Evidence of this can be seen in the paucity of words attributed to her in this pericope: first, she “was there” (v. 1); then, she says “They have no wine” (v. 3) and “Do whatever he tells you” (v. 5).

As Orobator has argued, transposed into an African context, this narrative demonstrates the powerful roles some African women play in social and political situations albeit largely unacknowledged because they are not always visible. While

⁴⁰¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Mariam’s Child and Sophia’s Prophet*, 164–65.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 167–77.

⁴⁰³ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories* (New York: Schocken, 2002), 333.

Orobator's analysis may be insightful, in the context of this thesis, it is incomplete and partly reductionist. He seems content to confine the role of Mary (and women's roles) to that of the proverbial real power behind the throne. While there is merit to his position, I argue that at Cana, Mary's presence and intervention were not voiced from a marginal stance or from behind; hers was an active presence and a frontal encounter. Mary did not stand behind Jesus, nor did she whisper in his ear as if to cajole him or plead with him. Rather, she "said to him" directly.

Considered as an African woman, Mary's presence and intervention at Cana uncover a maternal leadership role that is strikingly "political."⁴⁰⁴ What emerges here is not a woman whose personal characteristics and qualities commend her as icon of popular, pietistic devotion or in the words of Schüssler Fiorenza, modeling "obedience, humility, passivity, and submission as the cardinal virtues of women." At Cana, Mary of Nazareth was a leader whose active role beyond influencing action determined a direction for all including Jesus. It is possible here to intuit Mary's self-understanding and *modus operandi*. She sought not to receive permission but to take responsibility and elicit action to redress the embarrassing lack of wine. As Schüssler Fiorenza understands it, in spite of an apparent "rebuff," Mary

admonishes the servants (*diakonoï*): "Do whatever he tells you." If the Johannine community acknowledged *diakonoï* as leading ministers of the community, then Mary's injunction has symbolic overtones for the readers of the Gospel. In the beginning of the gospel ministry the leaders of the community are admonished: "Do whatever he tells you." Further, it is stressed that this exhortation must be accepted not because it comes from Jesus' mother but because it is given by a woman disciple.⁴⁰⁵

The exhortation and admonition stood on the authority of the bona fide disciple who delivered them.

In light of the foregoing, at Cana, Mary of Nazareth exercised an authority that was uncharacteristic of an innocuous, meek icon cast in plaster, plastic, or ceramic as Mary has tended to be portrayed. Furthermore, she projected a certain political parity

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 333–34.

⁴⁰⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 327.

with the surrounding menfolk at odds with the usual ideology of social inferiority.⁴⁰⁶

Reflecting deeply on this narrative,

It's interesting to wonder if the miracle Jesus performed at Cana, the changing of water into wine, would have ever taken place if Mary had not prompted him. It turned out to be a very serious event. John says that this miracle was his first sign, and thus his disciples (which would include Mary) put their faith in him. (John 2:11)⁴⁰⁷

After this event, Mary went with Jesus and his disciples (v. 12). She did not speak much or did much in Jesus' public ministry, but her role and identity as a disciple were confirmed and became more strikingly evident much later in John at the foot of the cross.

Quite interestingly, the wedding at Cana revealed not only the maternal leadership Mary exercised in the context of public ministry but also a confirmation of her identity as a disciple.

One of the greatest values of studying the life of Mary is wrapped up in the area of discipleship ... Her life speaks volumes about the costs and rewards of discipleship ... The experience at Cana for Jesus was a sign of his glory, but for Mary it was a sign of her growth. She was beginning to release her son from under her authority so that she could grow in faith as his disciple. She was in essence learning to let go and grow. But his process was not always so easy for her.⁴⁰⁸

3. Mary Magdalene—A Breaker of Taboos

One shocking discovery I made in the course of my studies was the frequency and conviction with which many Nigerians append negative labels to Mary Magdalene: adulteress, prostitute, temptress, demonic ... They assumed uncritically that the gospels contained truths and irrefutable evidence of her loose morals. Yet as Watson powerfully states and several scholars have affirmed, "there is no evidence in the four Gospels that

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 338.

⁴⁰⁷ Boyd Luter and Kathy McReynolds, *Women as Christ's Disciples: Models in the New Testament Church for Courageous Women Today* (Ross-shire: Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2003), 46.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 43.

Mary Magdalene was ever a prostitute.”⁴⁰⁹ “Nowhere in scripture is Mary of Magdala described as a prostitute.”⁴¹⁰

As Radford Ruether has argued, her story is a classic example of how a male-dominated scripture interpretation process has succeeded in misrepresenting the crucial evangelical, missionary, and leadership roles of this strong, dynamic, and prominent woman and painting a negative portrait of her specifically as a woman of loose morals. Though scripture does not support the popular portraits of her as a repentant prostitute, outside the canonical gospels that are heavily overlaid with androcentric biases, we see a markedly different account in other noncanonical sources, such as the gospel of Mary.

In this Gospel, written sometime at the end of the first century, Mary Magdalene is understood as the “apostle to the apostles” who has a special relation to Jesus, as the one who best understands his teachings. She is portrayed as conveying these secret teachings to the apostles, amid controversies over the authority of women. The Gospel vindicates this authority of Mary as the true intention of Christ, against Peter and other apostles who decry her authority. Such writings give us insight into the conflict that raged within early Christianity over women’s leadership.⁴¹¹

3.1. Deconstructing a Taboo

Perhaps the most enduring and endearing yet challenging event involving Mary Magdalene was Jesus’ postresurrection encounter with her in John 20:1–18. It is customary for theologians and exegetes to focus on the apostolic mandate Jesus entrusted to her: “Go, tell them ...” (v. 17) as illustration and proof of woman preaching imbued

⁴⁰⁹ Watson, *Wisdom’s Daughters*, 116.

⁴¹⁰ Tina Beattie, “‘The Touch that Goes Beyond Touching’: a reflection on the touching of Mary of Magdala in Theology and Art,” in *Noli me tangere: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Reimund Bieringer, Barbara Baert, and Karlijn Demasur, *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* (Leuven, Paris, Dudley MA: Peeters, 2016).

⁴¹¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Oppressive Aspects of Christianity” in *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: a Christian-Buddhist Conversation*, ed. Rita M. Gross and Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Continuum, 2001), 88.

with leadership resonances.⁴¹² Consistent with my narrative methodology and viewing this event from the perspective of an African woman, what new possibilities of interpretation or rereading of the story exists for revealing aspects of maternal leadership in church and society?

To undertake this exercise, I rely extensively on Beattie's captivating essay, "The Touch that Goes beyond Touching': A Reflection on the Touching of Mary of Magdala in Theology and Art." Beattie incisively and insightfully examines the theological and artistic implications of "touching" and "not touching," "desire" and "discipleship," in the postresurrection encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. I agree with Beattie that centuries of analysis, interpretation, and controversy not to mention unflattering ideological and patriarchal accretions surrounding the complex identity of the "real" Mary Magdalene "tell us a great deal about ourselves as disciples of Christ who seek to follow in her footsteps."⁴¹³ Beyond appropriating Beattie's analysis and conclusion, my primary intention in this section is to expand and deepen its theological and hermeneutical importance for validating the leadership and creative roles of women especially in the context of the church in Africa and the world church.

At first sight, the encounter appears to hinge and perhaps even founder on a seemingly strong prohibition: "Jesus said to her: *noli me tangere*" (v. 17). Upon deeper consideration, rather than repulse her, Jesus' words evoke and affirm the intimate tactility of the encounter. Mary Magdalene experiences a profound relationship in her touching and seeing the risen Christ in a way none of the male disciples could ever have imagined possible or experienced.

Tactility is a fundamental mode of existence in Africa, and nowhere is this more poignantly expressed than in the relationship between mother and child. Beattie's account, following L. Irigaray, would resonate strongly in any African context where "maternal relationship" is demonstrably

⁴¹² See examples in Raymond E. Brown, "Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel," *Theological Studies* 36 (1975): 688–99, footnote 14, <http://www.womenpriests.org/classic/brown2.asp> (accessed October 2, 2016).

⁴¹³ Beattie, "The Touch that Goes Beyond Touching," 381.

the source of a fundamental sense of bodily connection and dependence ... There is a human realm of touch before any possibility of sight, for between the mother and the child in the womb there is a fluid, tactile presence, a placental interchange which cannot be translated into metaphors of visibility.⁴¹⁴

Beyond this maternal resonance, the powerful image of Mary Magdalene's touching resonates with African women in another equally powerful and liberating sense. In cultures of West Africa, by virtue of their physiological constitution and menstrual experience, women are periodically excluded from ordinary domestic and social functions and roles they play in the family and society. When a woman is menstruating, she is forbidden to touch ... I refrain from listing the array of objects and persons she is prohibited from touching because they are legion. The prohibition to touch shows how a unique experience "representing the carrying of life" becomes a life-denying male obsession placed "in the same category as 'person suffering from a gonorrhoeal discharge'."⁴¹⁵

As I mentioned, several cultures in West Africa including mine are rife with prohibitions of touch when a woman is menstruating. To quote Oduyoye, "In the practice of traditional religion, a menstruating woman becomes 'untouchable.'"⁴¹⁶ But the realm of prohibition extends beyond religion to social interaction, domestic functions, and political participation. Going by Oduyoye's analysis, there are several instances where this prohibition of touching and the experience of women is manifested:

In general, menstruating women were not allowed to participate in rituals. One of the strictest taboos applied to the carving of drums, which was forbidden to all women ... Because blood was a taboo to the stately *atumpan* drums (one male, one female), women were not allowed to touch them.⁴¹⁷

Menstruation demands her exclusion ... For example, she must not sit in court to arbitrate any case; she may not cook for adult males, nor eat food

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 387.

⁴¹⁵ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 116.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 117.

cooked for any man ... A menstruating woman must not touch any talisman, any male, or participate in any ritual.⁴¹⁸

Oduyoye also notes the ambivalence toward menstruation: “On the one hand, it is highly esteemed as life-giving power; on the other, it is feared as a powerful negative spirit.”⁴¹⁹ Quite clearly, even in today’s society in West Africa, it is perceived with dread as “a pollutant,” and it continues to be the source of many ills, including violence visited on women of childbearing age. This prohibition translates into an injunction that many an African woman continues to hear during her periods. She may neither touch nor be touched—*Noli me tangere!*

3.2. *Fear of and Fascination with Blood*

As Musa Dube demonstrates in her eloquent, poetic retelling of the story of the woman with a flow of blood (Mark 5:24–43), much of Africa remains fixated on the “flow of blood,” whereas the larger issues that cause the bleeding of Africans and in particular women are largely overlooked. In Dube’s narrative reconstruction, the cause of bleeding for many African women is essentially a trinity of evil: poverty; sexual, gender-based violence; and disease such as HIV and AIDS. In the optic of this study, we ought to add maternal mortality to Dube’s list. The evidence is stark. To recall, despite significant progress,

99% of maternal deaths still occur in the world’s poorest countries, with 66% of these in sub-Saharan Africa. Estimates suggest that women in high income countries face a 1 in 3,300 lifetime risk of dying in childbirth, while in Sierra Leone and Chad a woman faces a 1 in 17 and a 1 in 18 lifetime risk respectively.⁴²⁰

Dube “supersizes” this woman as the African continent itself or Mama Africa:

Mama Africa is standing up. She is not talking. She is not asking. She is not offering any more money—for none is left. Mama Africa is coming behind Jesus. She is pushing through a strong human barricade. *Weak and*

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 118–19; Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 84–85.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 119.

⁴²⁰ Beattie, “Maternal Well-Being in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 176.

*still bleeding but determined, she is stretching out her hand. If only she can touch the garments of Jesus Christ.*⁴²¹

Remarkably, she did, and so did Mary Magdalene; the latter was not powerless. The postresurrection encounter of mutual touch rendered her powerful beyond the constraints of taboos and prohibitions. Unlike the other disciples at later apparitions, she did not wait to be invited and only later haltingly approached and hesitantly touched the body of the risen Christ. She reached out and touched; at that instant, near the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene emerged an apostle with no less a mandate than that of her male colleagues: she “went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’” (v. 18).

I reiterate my fundamental agreement with Beattie that

the touching of Mary of Magdala might be an invitation to rediscover that maternal mystery, not as a repository for the frustrated fantasies of a masculine hierarchy, but as the opening up of a sacramental world which we have almost forgotten, and which might yet draw us towards a more inclusive and holistic understanding of Church.⁴²²

From the perspective of many African women who labor under silencing and enslaving patriarchal, societal, and ecclesiastical impositions, there is an even more potent, liberating dimension to the Johannine narrative as I have reconstructed it narratively. Put simply, Mary Magdalene broke a taboo not in the legalistic sense of violating an injunction but in the active, defiant, and resistant sense where she declared an end to a yoke and a burden that had hung for centuries on end over countless African women, myself included. She dared to touch the risen body of Christ undeterred and unencumbered by oppressive patriarchal, social, cultural, and religious prohibitions founded on “social constructs of female sanctity and sexuality.”⁴²³

⁴²¹ Musa W. Dube, “Fifty Years of Bleeding: A Storytelling Feminist Reading of Mark 5:24–43,” in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W. Dube (Atlanta and Geneva: Society of Biblical Literature and WCC Publications, 2001), 59–60.

⁴²² Beattie, “The Touch that Goes Beyond Touching,” 393.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 381.

Like the Lucan woman with a flow of blood, this disciple, Mary Magdalene, broke a taboo. Unlike the former, who did with it trembling and trepidation, Mary Magdalene did so under the empowering glare of the glory of the risen Christ in response to a loving and compassionate call by the one who alone knew her by name. This is an image of liberation that I as an African woman and many of my African sisters can comprehend, appropriate, and re-create in establishing our social significance and political importance in church and society. As Okure declares,

to show that we have really been healed and freely empowered by God to live, we need to come forward and declare openly, fearlessly, that we had touched and been touched by Jesus, and that this intimate, personal encounter with him has made us “well,” that it can also make our whole society well. *It is not possible to touch or be touched by Jesus and remain in secret.*⁴²⁴

It was not possible for Mary Magdalene to touch and be touched by the risen Christ without going forth to preach and proclaim the good news.

3.3. Mary Magdalene and the Body of Christ

Set in an ecclesiological framework, my narrative approach to the story of Mary Magdalene has many implications for the church cast in a maternal mold,

a maternal Church in which the female body is denied sacramental significance cannot develop a healthy and life-giving sacramental life, for the language it uses is severed from the bodies which impregnate it with meaning.⁴²⁵

Though the narrative interpretation of Mary Magdalene empowers us to envisage a maternal church in which the female body is endowed with sacramental significance toward the edification of the body of Christ, one should be under no illusion about the enormity of the hermeneutical and theological task. The following recent examples serve to illustrate and justify my caution and apprehension.

⁴²⁴ Teresa Okure, “The Will to Arise: Reflections on Luke 8:40–56,” in Oduyoye and Kanyoro, *The Will to Arise*, 229; emphasis mine.

⁴²⁵ Beattie, “The Touch that Goes Beyond Touching,” 396.

In recent times, Pope Francis has made the bold move of elevating the simple memorial of Mary Magdalene (July 22) to the status of feast in the Eucharistic celebration of her life and significance in the Christian tradition. Affirming centuries of theological tradition, Francis recognizes Mary Magdalene as *apostolorum apostola*, apostle of the apostles, and a “true and authentic evangelizer” in the context of reflecting “in a more profound way on the dignity of Woman.”⁴²⁶ Francis’s praise for her knows no bounds:

This woman, known as the one who loved Christ and who was greatly loved by Christ, and was called a “witness of Divine Mercy” by Saint Gregory the Great and an “apostle of the apostles” by Saint Thomas Aquinas, can now rightly be taken by the faithful as a model of women’s role in the Church.⁴²⁷

But old habits die hard. “The story of Mary of Magdala is not yet finished.”⁴²⁸ Consider these two facts. The preface composed for the feast of Mary Magdalene is appropriately captioned Preface of the Apostle of the Apostles. It contains a narrative reconstruction of the postresurrection encounter between her and Jesus:

In the garden He appeared to Mary Magdalene, who loved him in life, who witnessed his death on the cross, who sought him as he lay in the tomb, who was the first to adore him when he rose from the dead, and whose apostolic duty was honored by the apostles that the good news of life might reach the ends of the earth.⁴²⁹

Largely accurate and positive, this reconstruction leaves out one crucial detail of Mary Magdalene’s vital, life-affirming experience: prior to adoring him, she was the first to see and touch his risen body, not an insignificant detail at all. In the perspective of this study, eliding this tactile intimacy between Mary Magdalene and the risen Christ has

⁴²⁶ <https://zenit.org/articles/mary-magdalene-will-be-celebrated-with-liturgical-feast/> (accessed October 14, 2016).

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Beattie, “The Touch that Goes Beyond Touching,” 396.

⁴²⁹ <https://zenit.org/articles/mary-magdalene-will-be-celebrated-with-liturgical-feast/> (accessed October 14, 2016).

consequences: left unchallenged, it reinforces centuries of gender-based hermeneutical and exegetical biases that exacerbate the condition of women in church and society by undermining their humanity, sanctity, and sexuality. The second fact is that in the prayer composed by the pope for the Year of Mercy, he succumbed to atavistic stereotypes, caricatures, and unflattering nomenclature:

Your loving gaze freed Zacchaeus and Matthew from being enslaved by money; the adulteress and Magdalene from seeking happiness only in created things; made Peter weep after his betrayal, and assured paradise to the repentant thief.⁴³⁰

In so doing, the pope aligned himself with other contemporary voices steeped in an erroneous and unjust portrayal of Mary Magdalene such as the six-part documentary *Decoding Christianity* produced by the Smithsonian Institute in 2008. In the segment “Flesh and Blood,” the narrator glibly named Mary Magdalene as “an adulteress.”⁴³¹ Indeed, the story of Mary Magdalene continues as do the trials and tribulations of her sisters in church and society. Yet like Mary, she is anything but silent or silenced. Both (along with “Lucy” below) are heroines and icons of the voice of powerful women called to preach the good news and resist any imposition of silence that “leads to stigmatization and exclusion, while allowing ruling authorities to control the lives of others by way of rigid rules and harsh condemnations.”⁴³²

Hence, to understand the audacity of Mary Magdalene’s touch and the injunction of the risen Christ “Do not cling to me,” it would be permissible to eliminate any suggestion of contradiction between the former’s gesture and the latter’s clear and powerful injunction. There is an important connection between both, but it is not negative. Precisely because Mary Magdalene touched the risen Christ, she was

⁴³⁰ https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/prayers/documents/papa-francesco_preghiere_20151208_giubileo-straordinario-misericordia.html (accessed October 14, 2016).

⁴³¹ <http://www.smithsonianchannel.com/videos/flesh-and-blood/45277> (accessed October 14, 2016).

⁴³² Beattie, “Maternal Well-Being in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 178.

empowered by Christ to announce the resurrection with credibility and authenticity as a witness, a disciple, and an apostle. As could Paul and the other apostles, she too could proclaim,

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands We have seen it and testify to it ... What we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you. (1 John 1:1–3)

Thus, “injunction” would seem inappropriate to this experience. Perhaps the experience is reminiscent of another “garden experience” of Jesus with his disciples that ended with an invitation to mission: “Rise! Let us go” (Matthew 26:46; Mark 14:42).

4. The “Woman at the Well”—Our Sister Lucy

In the poignant words of Judith Kaye Jones,

The woman at the well is many things: She is a tragic figure, she is a woman of ill repute, she is capable of holding her own in an astonishing conversation with someone who shouldn’t be caught dead talking to her—but most important of all, she is an evangelist. She is a preacher.⁴³³

Sadder still, like many of her sisters in church and society in Africa and elsewhere, the woman at the well is unnamed. Without intending to be unduly polemical but wishing to provoke deep thought and reflection, I will christen her Lucy.⁴³⁴ This begs the question: Is it conceivable for Jesus of Nazareth to have held an hour-long conversation with a woman without asking her name? After all, he asked demons their

⁴³³ Judith Kaye Jones, *The Women in the Gospel of John: the Divine Feminine* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 18.

⁴³⁴ Named after one of the most celebrated fossil finds of early humans by Donald Johanson and Maurice Taieb in 1974 in the village of Hadar, Ethiopia. Dated at 3.2 million years old, Lucy (*Australopithecus afarensis*) represents an ancestor of humanity in the true African sense of the word. Unlike the male-dominated class of ancestors, Lucy is a woman. See <http://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-fossils/fossils/al-288-1> (accessed April 6, 2016).

names (Luke 8:30).

I focus on Lucy's story in John 4:4–42 as I did on Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene that when we pay keen attention to the hermeneutical and Christological dynamics of the scripture, particularly the New Testament, we discover that the call to discipleship—and by extension ministry and leadership in the church—is grounded on a transformative encounter with the person and message of Jesus Christ unhindered by patriarchal bias, sexism, and gender discrimination, the likes of which I have uncovered in this study. I consider this exercise a specimen of what theologians in Africa and the world church ought to uncover and appreciate the pearl of great worth that is the gift of so many African women to the church and society.

I will follow the dynamics and trajectory of Lucy's faith journey and the Christological milestones that inspired her belief and illuminated her dignity as *imago Dei*. Lucy's experience is one of a gradual growth in faith and the acceptance of Jesus Christ, the same kind of faith we saw alive and glowing in those African women in chapters 2 and 3.

Jesus' sole interest was to reveal himself profoundly to her. In this process, she became a witness, a disciple, an evangelist, and more important, a leader of a faith community; her testimony led an entire town to faith in the Messiah (John 4:30). In light of the narrative of Lucy and the other preceding two, I will offer some suggestions and draw important lessons regarding the necessity of a more inclusive discipleship in the church that reflects the gifts of women and their examples as true and equal disciples of Jesus Christ in the African and the world church.

This characteristic or dynamic of an unfolding drama is in the story of the encounter between Jesus and Lucy. As a result, faith follows a path of gradual unfolding, knowing, and engaging. Their conversation at the well suggests disagreement and even miscommunication regarding the symbolism of water, rightness of belief, and site of worship. But all that is only at the surface. At a much deeper level, we discover a woman to whom Jesus desired to reveal the deepest reality of God made flesh, a woman who was indeed a witness and an evangelist, who finally affirmed the true status of Jesus as "Savior of the World" (v. 42) who led others to do the same.

However, there is more to this story than meets the eye, namely, the gender

quotient. Jesus revealed his identity to a woman at the well, not a man at the synagogue. Lucy, not a man, was the medium of a profound Christological revelation and discovery. This distinction is vital: Lucy is “a model of the female disciple and possibly a model for Samaritan believers also.”⁴³⁵ Thus, the male-dominated and highly patriarchal church should note that “at crucial points of narrative women emerge as exemplary disciples and apostolic witnesses.”⁴³⁶ This kind of observation hinges on the truth that is salvific if the church is to experience the fullness and wholeness of life.

What could be more consoling to again be reminded that women, the other half of the human family, in particular Lucy, were in fact very close witnesses to the historical Jesus and even to the Jesus of faith, that is, if we see them as the same entity, “since in the understanding of the evangelists we cannot separate the historical Jesus from the Christ of faith”?⁴³⁷ I will undertake the remaining part of this analysis in four phases.

4.1. Lucy in the Historical, Johannine Context

Raymond Brown makes the perceptive observation that

at the end of the first century, when the memory of the apostles (now increasingly identified with the Twelve) was being increasingly revered, the fourth Gospel glorifies the disciple and never uses the term “apostle” in the technical sense, almost as if the Evangelist wishes to remind the Christian that what is primary is not to have had a special ecclesiastical charism from God but to have followed Jesus, obedient to his word. In short, it is a Gospel that seeks to make certain that in the inevitable structuring of the Church the radical Christian values are not lost. What information does such a perceptive Evangelist give us about the role of women?⁴³⁸

In the Johannine context, an important feature of the story of Lucy is its uniqueness. It has no parallel in the synoptics. Generally speaking, if anything with the

⁴³⁵ Allan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 136–37.

⁴³⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 326.

⁴³⁷ Rudolf Schnackenburg and O. C. Dean, Jr., *Jesus in the Gospels: A Biblical Christology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 14.

⁴³⁸ Brown, “Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel,” 690.

exception of the Good Samaritan and the grateful leper (Luke 10:29–37, 17:11–19), the word *Samaritan* carries a negative connotation in many gospel narratives, and this is worse still if the word is associated with a woman. Samaria is forbidden in Matthew, totally overlooked in Mark, and portrayed as inhospitable in Luke. We would have to wait until the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts for the inauguration of formal contact with Samaritans (Acts 8:1–25).⁴³⁹ Yet something about Lucy's story tells us a lot about the origin of Christianity—the tussles, the processes, the crises, the biases, the actors and actresses, the catalysts, and the historical trajectory. In this light, Lucy, like Mary of Cleopas, would have played a significant role in embodying and revealing the central themes of the Johannine gospel.⁴⁴⁰

Though I referred to gender quotient above, in reality, the conversation between Jesus and Lucy in verse 2 had very little if anything to do with gender; the bone of contention centered on cultural perceptions, sociological differences, and religious stereotypes. The historical animosity between Jews and Samaritans was very much in evidence.⁴⁴¹

Jesus' request astonishes the woman, since he is a Jew and he addresses a Samaritan woman. Relationship between Jews and Samaritans were mostly unfriendly, because the Samaritans were considered since the exile as a mixed race of semi-pagans.⁴⁴²

Hence her trenchant query, “How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?” (v. 9).

Besides, the encounter says something about how a woman like Lucy was

⁴³⁹ Martinus C. de Boer “John 4:27—Women (and Men) in the Gospel and Community of John,” in *Women in the Biblical Tradition*, ed. George Brooke (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 221.

⁴⁴⁰ Richard Bauckham, “Mary of Clopas (John 19:25),” in *Women in the Biblical Tradition*, ed. George Brooke (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 231.

⁴⁴¹ Keith Crim, *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (N.P.: Abingdon Press, 1976), 484.

⁴⁴² Rudolf Schnackenburg and Kevin Smyth, *The Gospel According to St John, Vol. 1* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 425.

regarded in the cultural milieu that served as backdrop for this narrative; this is clearly manifested in the bewilderment, astonishment, and confusion of the disciples to see Jesus actually talking with a woman (v. 27). Being a Samaritan was bad enough; to combine that with being a woman posed an even greater danger. The crossing of social and ethnic barriers was forbidden. Like Jesus' male disciples, Lucy was equally surprised at the unusual move by a Jewish male; she was not used to such an iconoclastic advance. And as mentioned, she did not hide her astonishment: "How can you ...?" (v. 9).⁴⁴³ By reaching out to Lucy and revealing himself to her, the Evangelist "clearly wished thereby to reinforce Jesus' stress on the equal dignity of women."⁴⁴⁴ This is a vital lesson that many interpreters of this story either miss or suppress preferring instead to focus on her "irregular" marital status as evidence of her presumed questionable morality.

4.2. Jesus and Lucy: A Journey to Discipleship through Faith

There is a consensus among scholars about the structure of the Johannine narrative of Lucy: "The whole of the dialogue between Jesus and the woman can be divided into two clearly distinguished sections because of the break in the text at 4:16, that is, 4:7b–15 and 4:16–26."⁴⁴⁵ Without ignoring the importance of textual structure, my question is on a different level: Was the event at the well a chance encounter or somewhat predetermined? What was the necessity of passing through Samaria? Was it inevitable? The geographical configuration would suggest it was not inevitable.

The gospel text begins by telling us that Jesus had to go through Samaria in order to get from Judea to Galilee. But we know that Jesus didn't have to go through Samaria. Good Jews of the day didn't have to go there, and

⁴⁴³ See Janeth Norfleete Day, *The Woman at the Well: Interpretation of John 4:1–42 in Retrospect and Prospect* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 25.

⁴⁴⁴ Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (n.p.: Westminster Press, 1979), 190.

⁴⁴⁵ Eugene J. Botha, *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: A Speech Act Reading of John 4:1–42* (Leiden: E J Brill, 1991), 115.

they went to considerable effort to avoid it.⁴⁴⁶

As I have mentioned above, other key factors would have shown how ill advised a journey through Samaria was: it had a reputation for being a hostile territory peopled by deviants from Jewish orthodoxy who were for that reason despised and avoided like the plague. Jesus could have circumvented Samaria. However, more important, he had a mission I think that had to do with breaking down barriers that excluded women from the fold of discipleship, evangelization, preaching, and leadership in the community. As Betty Jo Buckingham and Jean Lichty Hendricks claim, “Christ had an appointment with a poor woman of that region.”⁴⁴⁷ Whether this reflected a historical journey of Jesus or a retrospective interjection of the commencement of the Samaritan mission, the fact remains that Jesus went out of his way and took the path less traveled to encounter this woman.⁴⁴⁸

Was he merely deviating from the familiar track, or was this the appointed path of the message of liberation? Looking at how the story unfolds and climaxes, I am inclined toward the latter option. There is a recognizable Christological agenda here: through a series of partial recognitions, Jesus’ identity was fully revealed, and Lucy ultimately got it:

Jesus is identified as the Messiah—This is the climax of the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman, who in the light of the testimony of what “she had done” left immediately leaving her water pitcher, and told the people what Jesus had told her. She introduced Jesus as the Messiah. As the result of this testimony, a nation accepted Jesus as their Messiah.⁴⁴⁹

Without a doubt, this story is Johannine Christology in microcosm: the interlocutor revealed himself to Lucy progressively as “living water” (v. 14), “Messiah,”

⁴⁴⁶ Jones, *The Women in the Gospel of John*, 14–15.

⁴⁴⁷ Betty Jo Buckingham and Jean Lichty Hendricks, *Women at the Well: Expressions of Faith, Life and Worship Drawn from Our Own Wisdom* (Elgin, IL: Women’s Caucus of Church of the Brethren, 1987), 157.

⁴⁴⁸ Jones, *The Women in the Gospel of John*, 15.

⁴⁴⁹ Buckingham and Hendricks, *Women at the Well*, 155.

“Anointed One” (v. 25), “I am” (v. 26), “Savior” (v. 42) ...

It is interesting to pay attention to the larger context of the story of Lucy; it is preceded by the story of Nicodemus, which is almost as detailed in the information that is supplied regarding the circumstances, personalities, themes, and structure of the conversation (3:1–21). Strikingly, however, something is different: from the onset (v. 1), the reader knows the name of the male interlocutor, Nicodemus, a respected member of the religious institution of the day. Contrary to the expectation of the reader—at least mine—at no point does the writer let slip the personal identity of the woman though we learn of her marital status, theological proclivities, and her “enemy” clan.

There are many ways of interpreting this contrast of personalities. Was it intentional? What did it seek to portray? It is possible that

John may intend a contrast between the woman of this narrative and Nicodemus of ch. 3. He was learned, powerful, respected, orthodox, theologically trained; she was unschooled, without influence despised, capable only of folk religion. He was a man, a Jew, a ruler; she was a woman, a Samaritan, a moral outcast. And both needed Jesus.⁴⁵⁰

Regardless of the author’s intention, what is clear is that unlike Nicodemus, Lucy became a model of faith for the entire Samaritan clan. Unlike Nicodemus, who despite his privileged position as teacher did not understand the basics of the Jewish faith (John 3:10), Lucy excelled in her theological acumen. The depth and scope of her comprehension and self-confidence as an interlocutor, disciple, and evangelist far exceeded what was permitted of people of her sociocultural status by the ruling, patriarchal class. On her account, the entire clan became more hospitable, and she discovered the true identity of Jesus as a proto-ancestor, prophet, and Messiah. She also discovered the true purpose and intent of worship.

She ultimately undertook the mission of leading her entire clan to a personal encounter with Jesus and a radical and profound profession of faith: Jesus was “truly the Savior of the world” (v. 42)!⁴⁵¹ Like the “officially” named disciples, she played a key

⁴⁵⁰Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans/Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 216.

⁴⁵¹Matera, *New Testament Christology*, 220–21; see Culpepper and O’Day, *The New*

role as a witness to the identity and message of Jesus Christ. Her powerful testimony directed at an entire people brought them to faith and confession.

Besides providing a noticeable contrast of gender-biased attitude, the narrative of Nicodemus (John 3:1–21) is important to this analysis in another important way. His story abounds with maternal metaphors: childhood, birth, rebirth, maternal womb, and maternal flesh. It is worth reiterating that as various authors such as Schneiders, Schüssler Fiorenza, Beattie, and Johnson already referenced in this thesis have demonstrated beyond contention that “maternal metaphors are a significant feature of biblical discourse about the nature of God.”⁴⁵²

Not surprisingly, as did his colleagues in the religious establishment, Nicodemus struggled with these metaphors that challenged his understanding and exploded his vision of who God was. Nicodemus’s theological angst was palpable: “How can a person once grown old be born again? Surely he cannot re-enter his mother’s womb and be born again, can he?” (v. 4). Renowned scripture scholar Sandra Schneiders commented on this narrative in poignant terms:

But Jesus also presented God in feminine images and metaphors. He insisted that a person must be born anew in order to enter into the reign of God. Nicodemus, with whom Jesus used this metaphor, understood it to be feminine because he asked how one could enter a second time into the maternal womb. When Jesus clarified the source of the new life, water and the Holy Spirit, he did not change the metaphor but repeated that one must indeed be born again. He even amplified the feminine image by explaining that what is born of flesh is flesh, i.e., what is born of woman is human, whereas what is born of the Spirit is divine. The divine mother of whom believers are born is the one God who is Spirit.⁴⁵³

Interpreter’s Bible, v 9: Luke, John, 570.

⁴⁵² Tina Beattie, “Maternal Well-Being in Sub-Saharan Africa: From Silent Suffering to Human Flourishing,” in *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (New York: Orbis, 2016), 176.

⁴⁵³ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Women and the Word: the Gender of God in the New Testament and the Spirituality of Women* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1986), 38.

Though there is no trace of a subsequent narrative of any transformation in Nicodemus's perception and understanding of God in feminine images and metaphors, the narrative shows an attempt by Jesus to validate the use and applicability of these images in a way that extends my argument about the evangelical (gospel) foundation of maternal leadership in church and society. Schneiders further notes,

Unfortunately, the theological tradition which has controlled the reading of Scripture has insisted on its own male understanding of God to the extent that it has virtually obliterated from the religious imagination this clearly feminine presentation of God the spirit as mother.⁴⁵⁴

Furthermore, the people of Samaria *believed* first on account of Lucy's word, a significant term in Johannine Christology and kerygmatic framework. According to Leonard Swidler,

This stress on the witness role of the Samaritan woman is further underscored by John's language. He says the villagers "believed ... because of the woman's word" (*episteusan dia ton logon*), almost the identical words he records in Jesus' "priestly" prayer at the last Supper when Jesus prays not only for his disciples "but also for those who believe in me through their word" (... *pisteuonton dia tou logou*, Jn 17:20).⁴⁵⁵

Thus, she was no less a disciple than were the other officially designated disciples. This is my preferred interpretation; it is obviously more favorable than some biblical scholars might affirm.

One may object that in chap. 4 the Samaritan villagers ultimately come to a faith based on Jesus' own word and thus are not dependent on the woman's word (4:42). Yet this is scarcely because of an inferiority she might have as a woman—it is the inferiority of any human witness compared to encountering Jesus himself.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman*, 190.

⁴⁵⁶ Brown, "Roles of women in the Fourth Gospel," 688–99, 691; Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 54.

The conclusion from the foregoing is that Lucy was as much a disciple as were other male disciples qualified or named in the New Testament. Most of the people Jesus called were eventually able to bring others to him because of their personal experience of Jesus. They believed, and they went out to share with others. This same pattern exists in the story of the encounter between Jesus and Lucy. Against several sociocultural and religious hindrances, she was a witness and proclaimed the Christ she discovered at the well.

Another important element in this story is the sequence in which the narrative unfolds. The narrative does not follow an orderly sequence, nor is it pointless banter between two strangers. There was call and response, question and answer, doubt and affirmation, surprise and awe, mission and commission. There were references to several events not always directly or only marginally connected to the core of the conversation—elements such as ancestral pedigree, holy sites, property rights, etc. Yet the focus remained stable and recognizable across the entire narrative, namely, the self-revelation of Jesus the Messiah.⁴⁵⁷ Equally significantly, Lucy stayed focused and followed the plot astutely until Jesus finally got to the point and she got the point.

4.3. Lucy and the Case for Inclusive Ecclesial Discipleship

I come now to the core of my analysis in the context of this study. Beyond the technicalities and intricacies of exegetical interpretations of the story of Lucy, the facts of the encounter are rather straightforward and accessible. Taking a cue from Schüssler Fiorenza, the subtitle of this narrative could well be “the missionary endeavors of a woman who initiated the conversion of the Samaritan segment of the community.”⁴⁵⁸ Thus, what would ordinarily have passed as a chance meeting acquired a significance much beyond the confines of local stereotype, ethnic bias, religious shortsightedness, and cultural prejudice. This much can be said of the denouement of this story: Jesus’ interlocutor, Lucy—like Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene—possessed or was

⁴⁵⁷ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 54; Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 220.

⁴⁵⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 327.

conferred an evangelical status, a ministerial role, and a leadership mission not unlike the male stalwarts of the New Testament. As Craig Keener notes insightfully, “The narrative thus places her on a par with Jesus’ other disciples who brought his message to the world.”⁴⁵⁹

Interestingly but unsurprisingly, not a few commentators consider her unimportant:

Her primary function is to be a foil for Jesus’ revelation. However, he [Raymond Brown] differs from Aquinas and many Medieval commentators in that he considers her capable of understanding Jesus’ spiritual intent in her conversation.⁴⁶⁰

In his incisive analysis of the general picture and position of women in John and the Johannine community, Brown draws conclusions based on sound exegesis that contradicts an age-old patriarchal mentality in exegesis and hermeneutics that sees very little if anything of value coming from the greater half of humanity—women. For Brown, not only did the Johannine women (Mary of Nazareth, the Samaritan woman, Martha, Mary, and Mary Magdalene) have “a real missionary function,” they had a status equal to “the same category of relationship to Jesus as the Twelve,” and this category qualified them as “‘first-class’ disciples.”⁴⁶¹ In light of Brown’s foregoing point, the encounter between Jesus and Lucy and her call to discipleship validated the role of women as witnesses, disciples, and missionaries of Christ, a role consistent with the apostolic commission of Mary Magdalene: “Go tell my brothers ...” (John 20:17). The evangelical profile of Lucy is multilayered and multitextured:

Her witness is threefold. First, she invites her fellow townspeople to “come and see.” This invitation is crucial in the Fourth Gospel (cf. 1:37–39, 46). It is an invitation to participate in the life of faith, to experience Jesus for oneself. Second, the woman offers her own experience as the basis of her witness, which here may build on the Samaritan expectation

⁴⁵⁹ Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 620–22.

⁴⁶⁰ Day, *Woman at the Well*, 29.

⁴⁶¹ Brown, “Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel.”

of a teaching Messiah (cf. v. 25). Third, she broaches the question of whether Jesus might be the Messiah ... she cannot quite believe that Jesus is the Messiah, since he challenges her conventional messianic expectations (vv. 23–25), but her lack of certitude does not stand in the way of her witness.⁴⁶²

Viewed from this multifaceted perspective, the exclusion of women from core ministerial and leadership functions in the church appears contrary to the gospel message. A reversal of this gender discrimination calls for the ability to practice what we read, teach, and believe in the gospel. As Stephen Smalley puts it, “the profound teaching of the Gospel, notably in the discourses of Jesus, is not so much an explanation of the fundamentals of belief as an exhortation to understand and apply that belief.”⁴⁶³ The church is still lagging behind in the application of this belief concerning the equality and dignity of all believers.

As I have pointed out above, there is a strong countercultural component to Lucy’s story. Not only were formidable odds stacked against her—her ethnicity, her “irregular” marital status, and her despised religious proclivities—her gender was a greater obstacle to being considered worthy of inclusion in the orthodox theological considerations of her times. The possibility of such inclusion constituted a grave threat to social conventions: “First, a Jewish *man* did not initiate conversation with an unknown *woman*. Moreover, a Jewish teacher did not engage in public conversation with a woman.”⁴⁶⁴

Many women continue to suffer all forms of discrimination simply because of their gender. Where they seek to serve in church, the clericalist custodians of the latter foist a role of servitude on them, a fact that Pope Francis recognized as the cause of much pain.

I suffer—speaking truthfully!—when I see in the Church or in some ecclesial organizations that the role of service that we all have, and that we

⁴⁶² Culpepper and O’Day, *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 9: Luke, John*, 569.

⁴⁶³ Stephen S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Exeter, England: Paternoster Press, 1978), 114.

⁴⁶⁴ Culpepper and O’Day, *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 9: Luke, John*, 565.

must have—but that the role of service of the woman slips into a role of “*servidumbre*” [Spanish: servitude] ... when I see women that do things out of “servitude” and not out of service ... And that it is not understood well what a woman ought to do. Can she be valued more?⁴⁶⁵

As the narrative of Lucy reveals, her genius lay in her unique capacity to read Jesus’ intent. To constrict the space in which women can apply their gifts and talents in the church ultimately impoverishes and damages the church. Pope Francis affirms this special gift of women for the edification of the body of Christ, the church:

I would like to underline how the woman has a particular sensitivity for the “things of God,” above all in helping us to understand the mercy, tenderness and love that God has for us ... And it pleases me to think that the Church is not “*il Chiesa*” [“the Church”—masculine]: it is “*la Chiesa*” [feminine]. The Church is a woman! The Church is a mother! And that’s beautiful, eh? We have to think deeply about this.⁴⁶⁶

Thus, beyond the exegetical rhetoric, “the story of the woman at the well is a typical example of this inclusive love of God through Jesus.”⁴⁶⁷ It is a story of how women can lead the church to develop “a particular sensitivity for the ‘the things of God’.” Lucy’s story provides a new paradigm of a radically inclusive gender relationship in the church.

In a certain sense, Lucy displayed two important qualities related to the gift of wisdom I discussed in the preceding chapter, namely, theological competence and resolve to engage the Messiah profoundly. She was neither intimidated nor shy in querying Jesus: “How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?” (v. 9), and she raised burning, contemporary theological issues: “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain;

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http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/10/12/pope_francis:_women_called_to_service,_not_servitude/en1-736720 (accessed March 29, 2016).

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http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/10/12/pope_francis:_women_called_to_service,_not_servitude/en1-736720 (accessed March 29, 2016).

⁴⁶⁷ Culpepper and O’Day, *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 9: Luke, John*, 565.

but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem” (v. 20). She held her own; she owned and used her voice. She would not be silenced or cowed by the presumed superior theological acumen of her unknown interlocutor. She held on tenaciously and would not allow the encounter to end prematurely until the man at the well revealed his true identity and delivered his message: “I am he, the one who is speaking with you” (v. 26).

Consistent with my argumentation, there is a lesson here for the church in Africa and the world church. Often, women’s opinions are presupposed or presumed with the church hierarchy assuming the role of a mouthpiece for issues affecting women from ethics of disease prevention to reproductive health. Inclusive ecclesial relationship entails making room for women’s voices to be heard so they can smile with their own teeth.

Though several theological and doctrinal arguments are adduced to justify the ministerial exclusion of women, a strong sociocultural substratum motivates this kind of thinking. As seen in the narrative reconstruction of Mary Magdalene, in many African cultures, for example, women are considered impure, vulnerable, and a threat to society’s religious and moral purity. These sociocultural constructs have a powerful influence on our imagination and eventually shape our actions. Lucy subverted this pseudo-hermeneutical paradigm and created room for generating more-inclusive and liberating models of ministry, service, leadership, and worship in the church.

In a radical way, as Culpepper and O’Day assert,

John 4:4–42 summons the church to stop shaping its life according to societal definitions of who is acceptable and to show the same openness to those who are different than Jesus did when he travelled in Samaria. The church is asked to cross boundaries as Jesus does instead of constructing them.⁴⁶⁸

Jesus’ role in this narrative affirms this mandate and undercuts any argumentation that sustains sexism or gendered-based discrimination. He

also challenges boundaries constructed on the basis of gender. The disciples’ astonishment in v. 27 does not derive from ethnic considerations but because Jesus speaks with a *woman*. Jesus will not be governed by

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 571.

those fears and prejudices, either, and thus he treats the woman as fully human.⁴⁶⁹

While it is true that “the woman of Samaria brings many people to Christ,”⁴⁷⁰ the scope of her evangelizing mission was not limited to her townsfolk. In the logic of the Johannine literary construct, the message was intended for the world of the reader, that is, our world. The whole world is Lucy’s pulpit. We are thus offered a unique opportunity to become converts and beneficiaries of her proclamation and to hear the message for ourselves (v. 42). For the church of the twenty-first century, the outcome of this evangelical experience is multiple. It is about recognizing, honoring, and celebrating the unique contributions of so many women to the church. Mission and ministry are not the exclusive preserve of the hierarchical and patriarchal menfolk. Thus, I agree with Culpepper and O’Day that

the Samaritan woman’s successful evangelization of her town belies the myth of the privileged positions of men as witnesses and disciples ... The Samaritan woman’s story summons churches to reexamine the boundaries they set around women’s witness and work.⁴⁷¹

The doctrinal and ministerial boundaries of contemporary orthodoxy perpetuate outdated models that place too many women outside the confines of vital mission and ministry. This fact is well known and attested to in the African church. For example, the second African synod (2009) admitted,

While it is undeniable that in certain African countries progress has been made towards the advancement of women and their education, it remains the case that, overall, women’s dignity and rights as well as their essential contribution to the family and to society have not been fully acknowledged or appreciated. Thus women and girls are often afforded fewer opportunities than men and boys. There are still too many practices

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁰ Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 69.

⁴⁷¹ Culpepper and O’Day, *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 9: Luke, John*, 572; Smith D. Moody, *John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 109.

that debase and degrade women in the name of ancestral tradition.⁴⁷²

I have so far demonstrated that the practices that the synod refers to are not limited to secular society or cultural practices; significant instances and examples exist in ecclesial circles and communities, that is, within the church.

By paying close attention to Lucy, we discover the centrality of her role as a missionary and apostle and her figure and personality as integral to the understanding of the mission and purposes of Jesus in regard to the Christian community. Thus, as Rudolf Schnackenburg and Kevin Smyth have cautioned, Lucy was not a mere symbol.⁴⁷³ Though she was not named, she had a personality and a mind of her own. More important, she did not discriminate in her missionary proclamation; she reached out to all her townsfolk (4:29, 39)!

Because of her story, no longer is anybody to be relegated to the margins of irrelevance on the basis of status, ethnicity, or gender; rather, all are welcome to the table of discourse as full and respected conversation partners. Her story has a liberating quality: it has the power to “liberate both men and women from any remaining doubts that women are called by Jesus to full discipleship and ministry in the Christian community.”⁴⁷⁴

Lucy’s story and those of Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene have a liberating quality; African women theologians who engage in similar retrieval from historical and biblical sources arrive at one conclusion, namely, a Christology of liberation. According to Oduyoye,

African women who have read the Bible with a critical eye discover in it the Triune God as liberator of the oppressed, the rescuer of the marginalized and all who live daily in the throes of pain, uncertainty and

⁴⁷² *Africae Munus* no. 56, www.vatican.va/.../hf_ben-xvi_exh_20111119_africae-munus_en.html (accessed December 6, 2014).

⁴⁷³ Schnackenburg and Smyth, *The Gospel According to St John Vol. 1*, 455.

⁴⁷⁴ Sandra M. Schneiders, “Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 12, no. 2 (April 1, 1982): 35–45, at 44.

deprivation. Added to this is the fact that in African Religion, God is always present in human affairs, as in the rest of creation, as judge, healer and the one who takes the side of the weak and vulnerable.⁴⁷⁵

The most popular image of Christ is as the Liberator, the victorious Christ who overcomes all the negative forces of oppression, marginalization, domination, and discrimination arrayed against the poor specifically in relation to African women.⁴⁷⁶

In the context of powerlessness, marginalization, and exclusion, salvation and liberation coincide as the same reality, and this applies particularly to women: “Christology, for African women, is the story of Jesus who saves, the one who not only announces, but also brings and lives the good news.”⁴⁷⁷ It is in this light that Orobator asserts,

The dominant trends in African feminist theology make the point that with little or no exception, church and society treat African women in much the same manner. Even where some exceptions exist, they tend to be insignificant. Given the underprivileged and marginal status accorded women both in church and in society, the concerns of African women revolve around the issue of liberation. For some African feminist theologians, the process involved in the liberation of African women from shackles of oppression attains its ultimate goal only with the emergence of what they described as a renewed humanity or community of wholeness.⁴⁷⁸

In the stories of Mary of Nazareth, Mary Magdalene, and Lucy, the ultimate purpose of the proclamation of Jesus’ good news is the liberation of all God’s people. One final point is worth noting to make the connection even stronger. In Brown’s analysis referred to above, he notes that like the “disciple who Jesus loved, the Evangelist never uses the personal name of Mary of Nazareth.” This is an important point according to Brown: “Both were historical personages, but they are not named by John, since their primary (not sole) importance is in their symbolism for discipleship rather than in their

⁴⁷⁵ Oduyoye, *African Women’s Theology*, 50.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁷⁸ Orobator, *The Church as Family*, 39.

historical careers.”⁴⁷⁹

Yet there is an even more interesting thread that connects the three women whose narratives I have examined in this chapter. Jesus addressed someone as “woman” in John three times, and in all three instances, they were the three women in this chapter: his mother, the woman of Samaria, and Mary Magdalene. Addison Hodges Hart points out interesting aspects of this observation. First, addressing them as “woman” or *gynae* has “special significance” and is linked to the woman of John 16:21. Second, it relates to the Johannine “hour,” which is a significant key for understanding the mission of Jesus. Third, it evokes a link with the “first and archetypal Woman of Genesis.”⁴⁸⁰ Hart points out,

All three women are individuals, delicately described with psychological insight. But I would also suggest that John has, with implicit intent, put the word “woman” on Jesus’ lips in his retelling of events, precisely in order to signify a specific something else we are meant to understand, something else which can be glimpsed shining through each of these distinct persons like refracted light. So, what might the importance of “woman” be as an address?⁴⁸¹

The importance of “woman” according to Hart’s argument is worth quoting in full:

What I am saying is that “Woman” in these specific texts is meant to conjure up a multivalent image, one which is, all at once and intertwined, the archetypal first woman as “mother” and giver of “life” (*zoe*—life, that is), the community of Christ’s followers, and the restoration of God’s life to human beings which comes through Christ and through the baptismal community that is “wed” to him. John is not a systematic theologian, but he is poetically consistent and mystically coherent. So, in one place the mother of Jesus can be “the Woman,” in another it is the Samaritan woman who reflects this image, and in another Mary Magdalene. There is, however, only one archetypal “Woman” towards whom this form of

⁴⁷⁹ Brown, “Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel.”

⁴⁸⁰ Fr. Addison Hodges Hart, “The Woman, the Hour, and the Garden,”

<https://afkimel.wordpress.com/2014/10/19/the-woman-the-hour-and-the-garden/>
(accessed October 3, 2016).

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

address always points, who stands above and behind them all, but there are three individual flesh-and-blood women who are thus addressed.⁴⁸²

Essentially, “woman” is an intentional evocation of Eve. As used by Jesus, the reference to woman is archetypal and emblematic of all women. Thus, in the larger Johannine context, woman is not any particular historical personage but a category of the redeemed, empowered, and liberated in Christ for maternal leadership in the community of the church.

Conclusion

This chapter was about taking a critical look at historical and biblical resources to retrieve material that warrants a more positive reading of the role of women and their mission in the Christian community. The way that this task has hitherto been approached in the context of a male, androcentric, and sexist theological and ecclesial framework has generated more stereotypes, symbols, and meaning that reinforced the marginal status of women in church and society. On this matter, Pui-lan is quite emphatic.

In the history of the Christian church, the Bible has largely been interpreted from a white, male, and clerical perspective. As a result, the subtleties of the historical encounter between different cultures, the politics of racial relations, and the hidden voices of women in the biblical account were either overlooked or interpreted from a very biased standpoint. The Bible has been used to legitimize racism, sexism, and classism, as well as to condone colonialism and cultural imperialism.⁴⁸³

When women focus their critical gaze on these historical and biblical sources as I have attempted to do in this chapter, they uncover the multiple underlying biases and discover a mine of positive interpretations, images, symbols, and meanings that allow them and the church to imagine a whole new church and mission. In the words of Christine Tse, women “are called not to abandon the church or surrender to apathy; they are called to be confident in the spirit, deepening their experience of Christ within the

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Pui-lan, “Racism and Ethnocentrism in Feminist Biblical Interpretation,” 101.

church so that the church will be renewed.”⁴⁸⁴

In this chapter, I undertook a narrative reading of the stories of three Johannine women that unfold through a multilayered practical, cultural, religious, and theological communicational encounter between Jesus and the women. They were not fictitious representations or caricatures of a class of people considered impure, unschooled, marginal, docile, and submissive. On the contrary, as we have seen and as Sandra Schneiders claims speaking about one of the feminine Johannine characters, Lucy, she is a strikingly original and uniquely fascinating personality

who realistically negotiates an incredible range of emotions from suspicion, to almost brassy defiance, to a complex mix of intelligent curiosity and blank understanding, to half-hearted deviousness, to total and selfless enthusiasm and commitment.⁴⁸⁵

The message of these Johannine narratives is glimpsed through the eyes of these three women. Through their conduct, actions, and responses, seemingly routine conversations and encounters between two people become good news for readers and the revelation of the Savior of the world. Though we read these narratives several centuries later, we are not simply bystanders or spectators; rather, we are drawn into the dynamics of the stories to hear the good news as mediated, announced, and preached by Mary of Nazareth, Mary Magdalene, and Lucy. Whereas on the surface their stories are replete with gender biases that exclude women from active and meaningful participation in the church’s mission and ministry, a careful and balanced analysis, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, reveals several lessons for the church today in Africa and in the world. In simple terms, without exception, women and men are called to equal participation in the mission and ministry of the church as disciples, leaders, and preachers of the good news of Jesus Christ. The three women in this chapter draw us into the liberating message and mystery of transcendence, salvation, and self-revelation of Jesus the Messiah.

In the next and final chapter, I will explore further this theme of divine mystery and incomprehensibility.

⁴⁸⁴ Tse, “New Ways of Being Church,” 95.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

Chapter 5

Bridging the Gap: the Imaging of God by African Women and a New Spirituality of Wholeness and Human Flourishing

Behold, I make all things new.

—Revelation 21:5

Introduction

The final chapter of this thesis focuses on paths for sustaining the hopes and responding to the aspirations of African women for the symbolic and spiritual significance of their maternal identity. As I have demonstrated in the preceding chapters, this maternal identity is the source of an ethos of new life rooted in relationality, care for the other, and the nurturing of transformed communities. One implication that serves as the connecting thread of this study is the imperative for women to be liberated from patriarchal domination and from an exaggerated preoccupation with biological motherhood so their maternal identity and leadership can emerge and flourish in church and society. The key elements of this final chapter can be summarized in the following terms.

The concept of motherhood in regard to African women embodies life; they are mothers of life, that is, intelligent and competent leaders, educators, and mentors endowed with gifts of the Spirit and capable of honoring, celebrating, and affirming the beauty and gift of womanhood. From within Africa's own cultures, traditions, and spiritualities, it is possible to discover resources that affirm the indispensable role of women in church and society.

The liberation of African women from the stranglehold of biological motherhood in theological and ideological discourse will happen by adopting a spirituality of liberation already present and active in the lives of so many African women as demonstrated in the preceding chapters. This chapter focuses on identifying the foundations and tracing the contours of a new spirituality based on the experiences and narratives of African women we have so far discovered and explored in this study.

To begin with and in preparation for unveiling the aspects of this new spirituality,

I will revisit the age-old question of naming the divine—a question I broached only sketchily in analyzing the narrative of Nicodemus in chapter 4—or the incomprehensibility of God as a safe passage into the question of the spiritual identity of women. With whom do women identify to assert their spiritual identities? How do these identities empower women to overcome and bridge the cultural and religious divide between them and their inalienable dignity as *imago Dei*? To achieve this objective, I will engage Elizabeth Johnson and the French postmodern philosopher Jean-Luc Marion in a theological conversation about the mystery of God in relation to the experiences of African women. This conversation will demonstrate how the naming, norming, and imaging of divine mystery with masculine features have led to the oppression, subordination, and victimization of women in Africa. More significantly, it will show that such outcomes are not permanent conditions of theological discourse; other possible and more life-affirming paths exist.

In the second instance, I intend to undertake a phenomenology of the face of African women as a symbol for imaging God and accessing the incomprehensible mystery of God through their love, passion, and compassion. In the final analysis, I hope to answer the questions, What does God look like named in the image of African women? How does the imaging of God drawn from the experiences of African women grant access to the incomprehensible mystery? My hope is that by breaking the male mold of divine mystery and re-presenting it in a more inclusive image, we will close the gap in theological and ecclesial discourse that set woman and man apart (or rather, man over and against woman) and witness the birth of a new spirituality of woman and man as *imago Dei* equally. Also, it will mean filling at least partially the gap I identified in chapter 3 in the Christological approaches by African women theologians.

1. Comprehending the Incomprehensible: a Word with Elizabeth Johnson and Jean-Luc Marion

In her insightful and thought-provoking essay “The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female,” Elizabeth Johnson poses “an absolutely critical question”: “Is the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition so true as to be able to take

account of, illumine, and integrate the currently accessible experience of women?”⁴⁸⁶ She demonstrates how God can and ought to be imaged as male and female in a mutually supportive and enriching dynamic though Christian tradition has long established the male category as the norm for imaging God.

In her groundbreaking work *She Who Is*, a sequel to her essay, Johnson further argues for an inclusive understanding of God that recognizes and honors the feminine imaging of the divine in theological discourse grounded on solid scriptural exegesis. She observes poignantly,

The way in which a faith community shapes language about God implicitly represents what it takes to be the highest good, the profound truth, the most appealing beauty ... Such speaking, in turn, powerfully molds the corporate identity of the community and directs its praxis.⁴⁸⁷

In light of my argument in this thesis, I add that it molds the identity of women and circumscribes their scope of action. Johnson’s observation references a stubborn fact that theological pedagogy and ethical discourse of the church and academy ought not to circumvent by hastily trumpeting the male image of God as universally acceptable.

The discourse on the comprehensibility or incomprehensibility of God flows in a stream that originates from what Johnson calls “the dawn of human history when self-consciousness first flickered into being on this planet ... members of the species *homo* seem to have lived with a sense of being surrounded by the numinous” with which they sought communion “by means of stories, symbols, and rituals subsequently called by the umbrella term ‘religion’.”⁴⁸⁸ Thus, the quest to image God by drawing upon human experience does not begin with modernity.

The evidence of contemporary experiences in phenomenology and postmodern

⁴⁸⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson, “The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female,” in *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): 441–465 at 445.

⁴⁸⁷ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 4.

⁴⁸⁸ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *The Quest for the Living God: Mapping the Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 7.

thought awakens us to numerous and diverse claims that challenge and contest the traditional male imaging of God. In light of such contemporary claims and contestations, Jean-Luc Marion embarks on a phenomenology of God without being that is a critique of idols that routinely and deceptively—even if with much metaphysical sophistication—pass for the divine in theological discourse. Marion asserts that “human discourse determines God ... hence might be conceptualizing something that it would take upon itself to name ‘God,’ either to admit or dismiss. The idol works universally, as much for denegation as for proof.”⁴⁸⁹ By implication, what we name hastily as God according to our own image resembles less a divinity than an idol.

The ethical implications of the male imaging of God as essential and normative cannot be debated or addressed solely on a consideration of a more inclusive image. It is imperative to pay attention to the narratives of those most affected by a male-dominated God. This category of people, as I maintain consistently in this thesis, comprises mostly women. For the purposes of this study, I have focused predominantly on African women, especially those who are poor, silenced, and oppressed by a constellation of factors including maternal mortality. Their narratives and experiences call into question the moral and ethical responsibility that church and society owe them to take these narratives and experiences into account and integrate them into naming and imaging God, as Johnson argues. Recognizing and integrating these narratives opens a path toward human flourishing for all women and men.

Notwithstanding the sociological, cultural, and religious diversity that exists among African peoples, by and large, they consider God as the sacred one who permeates all things. Women are no exception in subscribing to this belief. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, in various parts of Africa, their worldview of close relationship with the sacred expresses a certain rhythm that echoes their cry for liberation from the domination of the supreme male God fashioned in the image and likeness of their male counterparts.

⁴⁸⁹ Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, second ed., trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012), 33.

2. The African God the Father Created in the Image and Likeness of Man

Because Africa is not a homogenous entity, any study of any demographic constituent of the continent risks generalization. However, the majority of African women exhibit and value love, passion, and compassion in their imaging of God and in spite of many challenges a desire for the divine. They celebrate and share life with others. A person who is considered an icon in African communities is one who cares for others. Life is not measured by a masculine or feminine image of God but rather by the way one exhibits love, compassion, goodness, kindness, joyfulness, humility, and reverence for all creation. God is not imaged as a person but rather as an experience. They speak and sing of God's goodness in the many experiences of their lives as God who is love. In the traditional African worldview, God is an experience rather than a fixed and definite image cast in a rigid and unbreakable mold. This experience can be found in many expressions.⁴⁹⁰

The history of African peoples illustrates the idea that their comprehension of God is genderless. Most African societies do not have gender distinction in their language. Among the Ishan of southern Nigeria (which I claim as my ancestral origin) for example, a man and woman are often both described as *oria*, which loosely translates as a unique and clearly determined "person." A person is determined in the sense that he or she "distinguishes himself from the rest of the world. I am a person because I can say: 'I am I and I am not you.' Personality thus consists in the faculty of knowing oneself to be one individual among others."⁴⁹¹

In general, for many Africans, God is made comprehensible in the existence and realities of their experiences albeit sometimes reflected in personhood and especially in maleness as introduced by Christianity. As had happened elsewhere, missionary Christianity—in addition to its gender-biased images of God—invested God with human

⁴⁹⁰ See Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 24–25. This is one of the central affirmations of Laurenti Magesa in his book, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013).

⁴⁹¹ Clarence Edwin Rolt, *Dionysius the Aeropagite: On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1920), 7.

qualities drawn from African cultures and indigenous religious traditions all of which were patently patriarchal and androcentric. The idea that God “is utterly transcendent, neither male nor female, yet creator of both in the divine image”⁴⁹² was severely contradicted by what I term the African God the Father variously and literally imaged as King, Warrior, Elder, Overlord, Chief, Hunter, Husband, Ancestor, and Protector.⁴⁹³

This gender-biased imaging of God has become an oppressive idol that obscures and distorts the invisible God in the sense in which Marion understands and explains this term.⁴⁹⁴ As keepers of the shrines and altars of this masculine idol, many African men find justification in appropriating positions and roles of authority and in suppressing and relegating women to a subservient and subordinate status in society. The certainty that comes with the comprehension of God in male images has in many ways instigated and aided the oppression of women. Yet in reality, the idolization of the male image for God whose roots stretch back to patriarchal Greco-Roman influences has been enslaving for both male and female. The incorporation of these foreign elements and doctrine into African Christianity has caused massive damage especially for women. African Christianity names God as male with certainty and in the process considers and renders the feminine experience secondary and irrelevant.

Strikingly, Christianity readily joins cause with culture to lend justification to this process of dehumanization and demeaning of the female body and psyche and the silencing of women’s voices. Curiously but unsurprisingly, religion and culture in Africa

⁴⁹² Johnson, “The Incomprehensibility of God,” 464.

⁴⁹³ These titles, images, and models are routinely transposed into Christological categories and discourses in African theology. Notable examples include Robert Schreiter, ed., *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991); J.N.K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa, eds., *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology* (Nairobi: Initiatives Publishers, 1989); John Pobee, *Exploring Afro-Christology* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992); Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Oxford, UK: Regnum Africa and Editions Clé, 2000).

⁴⁹⁴ Marion, *God without Being*, 26–27.

seem to eschew mutual animosity when it comes to asserting the priority of the male over the female. Here, one finds compatibility of purposes between religion and culture.

In general, religion in Africa is suffused with a gender ideology that is detrimental to women. The signs and evidence of this ideology are abundant. From the naming of children, to the everyday language of social interaction, to the rites and rituals of passage and worship, and to cultural narratives (proverbs, myths, and legends) and prohibitions and taboos,

the gender parameters in African culture and African religions have crucial effects on women's lives and on how womanhood is viewed by Africans ... Gender as the power, priority and preference of biological male over the biological female was evident everywhere.⁴⁹⁵

The male God enthroned at the center of this religion would be more properly conceived of as an idol in Marion's phenomenological framework to the extent that it presides over and lends false rationalization to the oppression and subordination of African women not to mention the arrogance of those who claim to know and name him as God the Father. Predictably, as the religious institution that supports this theological framework, the church functions "as a gendered institution with men as owners and women as the clients."⁴⁹⁶

The realization that God the Father is the locus of oppression, discrimination, subjugation, and dehumanization of women especially in Africa is perturbing. As I have demonstrated in this study, many African societies and their gender-biased constructs perpetuate the assigned roles of women more in service to and at the mercy and pleasure of their male counterparts. Unfortunately, theology is complicit in this process of gender-based subjugation. This should hardly surprise us because "the domain of theology is particularly the domain of the symbolic production of meaning and a special place for

⁴⁹⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Gender and Theology in Africa Today," *Mother Pelican* 6, no. 12 (December 2010),
<http://www.pelicanweb.org/solisustv06n12page3mercyoduyoye.html> (accessed August 19, 2016).

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

reproducing the dominant social and cultural structure.”⁴⁹⁷

Thus, Oduyoye observes correctly that in Africa, as in elsewhere, “the symbolic world of Christianity, and particularly of published theology, is dominated by male symbols.”⁴⁹⁸ As a result, Christianity becomes a vessel of an unjust societal effort to reduce women, the other half of humanity, to nothingness. God the Father is enthroned in his glory as the God who stands apparently for both sexes even though the reality suggests the contrary, that this male God is more of a misogynist than a philogynist. We see here a revelation of how the masculine is favored and normed over and above the feminine. Consequently,

We speak of the tradition of the fathers of the church as if the community of believers can dispense with the mothers of the church ... we speak of the disciples, apostles, and followers as if they were all men and as if the establishing of the church could have taken place without the devout action of thousands of women.⁴⁹⁹

It does not end there. To the detriment of not only women but also men, “the feminine side has always been considered dark, inferior, less gifted, or closer to the material world. The masculine side has been judged superior, bright, and closer to the spiritual, more suitable for representing God.”⁵⁰⁰ In this way, the denial of the worth and dignity of women reaches its climax. Their contribution is as worthless as their lack of dignity or invisibility is assured.

Judging by the foregoing considerations, notwithstanding the gains and progress of feminism, African women, including many African theologians, still struggle to break away from the normative male God who has been depicted as God the Father from the beginning of the early missionary enterprise in most African societies. Such is the totality of the grip of this God the Father over African women that

⁴⁹⁷ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 69.

⁴⁹⁸ Oduyoye, “Gender and Theology in Africa Today.”

⁴⁹⁹ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 72.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

the life of an African woman unfolds along a trajectory of servitude: from her home, where she serves every family member, to her church, where she continues to serve at the pleasure of ordained clergy and with very limited opportunities for leadership and recognition of her value as a disciple of Jesus Christ.⁵⁰¹

Understandably, women's theological research and scholarship in Africa have as a critical objective the decoupling of the intractable complicity of masculinity and divinity in order as Oduyoye argues "to exhibit the feminine face of God and to distance God from the violence against women that has become endemic in man-woman relations in Africa. God had to be placed beyond gender."⁵⁰² Her salutary warning is worth repeating in full:

"God is male does not make the male God" ... Men must not continue to co-opt God into this hierarchy of being by reading into the scripture an order of male over female as ordained by God. African women took refuge in the existence in versions of African Traditional Religion in which the creator is imaged as a woman.⁵⁰³

Yet, female imaging of the female divine remains a pending task for African women theologians. Imaging the creator as female offers us an opening into the consideration, affirmation, and honoring of the qualities and characteristics exhibited by African women that lend themselves to the task of accessing the incomprehensible mystery of God.

⁵⁰¹ Anne Arabome, "Woman, You are Set Free!" in *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: The Second African Synod*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 120.

⁵⁰² Oduyoye, "Gender and Theology in Africa Today."

⁵⁰³ Ibid.; cf. Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 38. The argument by some theologians affirming the equivalence of images of God as father and mother in African religion is belied by a practice that predominantly prioritizes the use of male images. See George Kwame Kumi, "God's Image as Equivalently Father and Mother: An African Perspective," *Afer* 38 no. 4 (August 1996): 203–28.

3. From Incomprehensibility to African Women's Imaging of the Divine, New Spiritual Identity, and Liberation Spirituality: a Bridge of Caution

The movement from a discourse on divine incomprehensibility to discerning the contours of the divine, in and through the face and experience of African women, and elaborating a new spiritual identity and liberation spirituality, is anything but automatic. A too-facile a jump or transition creates serious contradictions, of the kind that Johnson and Marion have criticized.

The theological literature offers some hermeneutical signposts helpful not only for bridging this transition, but, more importantly, for checking or controlling the claims about the spiritual fecundity of African women's experience – which this study claims as a resource for imaging the divine – for analytical excess or ideological overindulgence.

A first important note is that the source or origin, or better still, the point of departure, remains an experience of the divine, or what Uzuoku aptly identifies as “an experience of the *same* Triune God of the great Tradition.” This implies that the initiative belongs to the divine; and, the privileged access to this experience, for a Christian, at least, is “God's redemptive action in Jesus Christ.”⁵⁰⁴ Congolese woman theologian Bernadette Mbuy-Beya formulated this principle in similar terms: “The quest for inner peace and for liberation finds its answer in the encounter with Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man.”⁵⁰⁵ However, in the optic of this study, a more appropriate formulation

⁵⁰⁴ Uzuoku, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness*, 214.

⁵⁰⁵ Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, “African Spirituality: A Cry for Life” in *Spirituality of the Third World*, ed. K. C. Abraham and Bernadette Mbuy-Beya (Maryknoll, Orbis: New York: 1994), 66. On the basis of this idea of encounter, Ghanaian theologian Elizabeth Amoah defines spirituality “as the result of, and the end to, the life that ensues from personal or corporate encounter and experience with that which restores to all people on earth their lost humanity and sensitizing the powerful and dominant class to use their tools of power and domination in ways that make people live rather than die.” “A Living Spirituality Today” in Abraham and Mbuy-Beya, *Spirituality of the Third World*, 50-51. In other words, she continues: “The basis of a living spirituality today is preceded by a radical encounter which gives life and that which empowers men and women, young and old, rich and poor to be sensitive to, and to get involved with, life-giving activities.... All that one is saying is that in order to be able to get involved in life-giving activities, a genuine and true spirituality demands getting in touch with the spirit, the PRESENCE constantly. Otherwise, it becomes an empty and shallow spirituality.” Ibid, 51-52.

would be as follows: the encounter with Jesus Christ occasions inner peace and liberation. This theological trajectory has been amply illustrated and demonstrated in chapter 4 in the interpretation of narratives of women in the gospel of John.

As it was in the Johannine gospel account so it is for the women in this study: encounter moves to transformation and action: “An African woman perceives and accepts Christ as a woman and as an African. The commitment that flows from this faith is a commitment to full womanhood (humanity), to the survival of human communities, to the ‘birthing,’ nurturing, and maintenance of life, and to loving relations and life that is motivated by love.”⁵⁰⁶

The following sections take cognizance of and are guided by this trajectory that originates in encounter and moves toward peace and liberation embodied in spirituality, while avoiding any hint of hubris.

Furthermore, as a second signpost, incomprehensibility necessarily doubles as inexhaustibility and ineffability, especially as understood in classical spirituality. To have recourse again to Uzuoku’s insight, however we name God and in whatever context, we need to make room for “flexibility, openness to universality, enabling God to have appeal beyond local cultural limitations.”⁵⁰⁷ This study is *limited* largely to varied experiences and situations of poor African women in church and society. While it is true that their word on God, as documented in this study, makes sense within their context, God is not exhausted by the exercises of naming, sense-making, and making meaning from the experiences attributed to African women. In other words, the imaging of the divine and the spiritual identity that this study explores based on the experiences of African women do not serve as the final word on the nature of the divine. God has an appeal beyond this imaging and this identity. To argue otherwise would amount to a form of idol-making.

Regarding the naming or imaging of God, thirdly, this experience is a work of the spirit. On the human side, in response to this work, a minimum condition would entail a measure of receptivity that disposes a person to the actions and movements of the spirit. It is possible to illustrate the point that I am making here by revisiting the phenomenon of spirit possession that I discussed extensively in chapter 3.

⁵⁰⁶ Amoah and Oduyoye, “The Christ for African Women,” 44-45.

⁵⁰⁷ Uzuoku, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness*, 45.

Arguably one of the most striking accounts of spirit possession in the sense that I understand it comes from the religious performance of a character in the literary classic, *Things Fall Apart*, by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe – already mentioned in the introductory chapter. On a particularly charged night of revelation, the high priestess of Agbala prophesies and names her god in multiple tongues and images. The quotation below begins at the time when the priestess announces her presence and carries the child of the protagonist, Okonkwo, into the hills and caves of her goddess:

.... at that very moment a loud and high-pitched voice broke the outer silence of the night. It was Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, prophesying. There was nothing new in that. Once in a while Chielo was possessed by the spirit of her god and she began to prophesy.... At last they took a turning and began to head for the caves. From then on, Chielo never ceased in her chanting. She greeted her god in a multitude of names – the owner of the future, the messenger of the earth, the god who cut a man down when his life was sweetest to him.... The moon was now up and she [Ekwefi] could see Chielo and Ezimma clearly. How a woman could carry a child of that size so easily and for so long was a miracle. But Ekwefi was not thinking about that. Chielo was not a woman that night.⁵⁰⁸

Upon close examination of this text, two things strike the eye. First, there is an empowering and transformative quality to the encounter of the divine. It begs the question: if Chielo was not a woman that night, what or who was she? Second, naming the divine, in this case greeting “her god in a multitude of names,” may seem exceptional, occurring only at the time of possession by the spirit; but, it is not limited to such intense moments of encounter. Part of the purposes of the remaining parts of this chapter is the realization that the ordinary experiences and practices of African women profiled in preceding chapters constitute a rich repository of resources for naming and greeting the divine, without exhausting the divine or reducing the divine to common speech.

A final point in relation to the idea of spirit possession or naming being a work of the spirit. The medium of communication is not limited to the spoken word. Magesa in his critical account of African spirituality identifies a wide range of dynamic aesthetic performances which opens human experience to the realm of the divine, as well as facilitates the imaging and communication of the divine via concretely and immediately

⁵⁰⁸ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 70 ff.

recognizable media. Among these are song, dance, art, and indigenous architecture.⁵⁰⁹ Although this study constantly references the experiences (in stories, accounts, and narratives) of African women, this is not the only medium for the spirit's revelation or manifestation.

With these points noted, a path now opens for the discussion in the following sections of women's experience as resources for imaging the divine, constructing a new spiritual identity, and practicing a liberation spirituality. The elaboration of this identity and spirituality is inspired by the experiences and practices of African women encountered in this study and oriented toward holistic and transforming human flourishing. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, this path or bridge to the following sections is to be traversed with analytical restraint and methodological humility.

4. The Face of African Woman: Imaging God through their Love, Passion, and Compassion

As I have indicated above, in my Ishan (Nigerian) dialect, God is often described not so much as male or female but as an experience. Interestingly, this confirms Dr. Marie Baird's assertion that "God is not a noun, God is a verb," a point that she makes very strongly in relation to Marion's understanding of "God without Being."⁵¹⁰

To get to the heart of the matter, Johnson echoes the question of women's voices: "What is the right way to speak about God in the face of women's newly cherished human dignity and equality?"⁵¹¹ For African women, God is often depicted in their own experiences. Confronted with a constellation of problems and challenges, most African women respond with love, passion, and compassion. The resilience of many African women is an example of true joy and hope. In the most dehumanizing situations, these women remain hopeful even as they struggle to rise above the immobilizing quicksand of oppression and domination orchestrated by their male counterparts.

Several examples from the preceding chapters of this study reveal how the lives

⁵⁰⁹ Magesa, *What is Not Sacred?*, 69-80.

⁵¹⁰ Marie Baird, "Unpublished class notes" (Duquesne University, Pittsburgh).

⁵¹¹ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 6.

of African women unfold and well up from deep within as they exude compassionate love and kindness in total self-giving and selfless service to all who encounter them. It almost seems paradoxical that despite the dehumanization that women face, they still give of themselves selflessly to society—confined to “the lowest ebb, marginalized, and yet sustaining every society.”⁵¹²

The image of many African women automatically generates a picture of the poor, afflicted, uneducated, and deprived. This stereotypical imaging of African women presents a particular concern for feminist discourses on God. As Johnson reminds us, these discourses cannot circumvent the glaring need to promote the

flourishing of poor women of color in violent situations ... securing the well-being of these socially least of women would entail a new configuration of theory and praxis and the genuine transformation of all societies, including the churches, to open up more humane ways of living for all people, with each other and the earth.⁵¹³

The evidence of this happening in the church in any significant way remains scant.

The Vatican II document *Gaudium et spes* states that women should “assume the role appropriate to their own particular nature” (no. 60). Variants of this formulaic understanding exist in numerous pre- and post-Vatican II documents as we have seen in chapter 2. This familiar script reveals a consistent attempt on the part of the men in the church to consign women to “their own nature” as though this were something fundamentally different from the nature of a human being. The reason for this pattern of thinking is to suppress women and elevate men as the true representatives of God. When simply adopted without a critical analysis and hermeneutics, such slogans end up banishing women to the margins while upholding the masculine image of God as the norm. The power of this God rigidly delineates the boundary of the nature of women and

⁵¹² Ibid., 11.

⁵¹³ Ibid; see Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Call of Women in the Church Today” in *Women of Faith in Dialogue*, ed. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 77.

consequently their roles in church and society.⁵¹⁴ Furthermore, as I have argued above in agreement with Oduyoye, the nature of man becomes that of God and the female dissolves into invisibility and marginality.

In this context, considering the experiences narrated in the preceding chapters, I maintain that African women reveal not a nature as proposed by the magisterium in its attempt to assign roles to gender but a face that calls for and radiates compassionate love. Theirs is a face that reveals a God whose presence and abode reside among the poor of the earth. This face not only pleads, “Do not kill me” but also entreats, “Please recognize and acknowledge me!”

Though the subordination that many African women experience has dehumanized them through poverty, sickness, and diseases, they still rise with hearts filled with love and compassion. They cry out for life for themselves and all they encounter. Thus, their face is a strident plea for life. In this sense, I find the words of Marion illuminating:

The face (that cannot be looked at) of the look of the other person only appears when I admit—submitting myself to him or her—that I must not kill. Certainly, I can kill the other person, but then he or she will disappear as a face, will be congealed into a simple object, precisely because the phenomenality of the face forbids its being possessed, produced, and thus constituted as an intentional object.⁵¹⁵

The face of African women—that we must not kill—can reveal radical, self-emptying compassion and total, self-giving love in the sense that we allow others to be and not, as Marion cautions, possess, produce, and rarefy the worth and dignity of the other person. The face of African women can teach us that “the techniques of emptying the mind of thoughts and images is of no use, is even dangerous, unless that same mind is filled with a very special love of God.”⁵¹⁶ The examples presented and analyzed in the

⁵¹⁴ See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 78.

⁵¹⁵ Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 116.

⁵¹⁶ William Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing: A Modern Interpretation* (New York: Desclée, 1967), 30.

preceding chapters, especially in chapter 3, demonstrate convincingly that African women have developed a rich, life-giving, inner sense of the divine that evades the overbearing and marauding God the Father who exists to assert the rights of men and uphold their power over women in church and society.

Ironically, however, the implication of the foregoing is that African women do not have a face—at least not one recognized by the African God the Father, whose primary interest is to silence, control, and dominate them as his playthings. Like Lucy in the previous chapter, because of the way Christianity and African religion have treated women, many of them have no name or face; they exist not for themselves but for others. Many become objects and instruments in the hands of their male counterparts. Their identity and worth are judged in biological terms by the way and what they produce and reproduce. Accordingly, their production and reproduction determine their role in society. African women are typically wives of somebody or mothers of somebody; their roles and identities are defined in such biological and narrow terms. Thus, as Oduyoye notes incisively,

An adult woman, if unmarried, is immediately reckoned to be available for the pleasure of all males and treated as such. The single woman who manages her affairs successfully without a man is an affront to patriarchy and a direct challenge to the so-called masculinity of men who want to “possess” her.⁵¹⁷

It is for such women that the feminist discourse exists to create a voice and to restore them to the dignity of persons created in the image and likeness of God. Hence, I concur with Johnson that “when such women with their dependent children and their sisters around the world live peacefully in the enjoyment of their human dignity, only then will feminist theology arrive at its goal.”⁵¹⁸ And as Marion points out, “Man remains the original locus of his idolatrous concept of the divine, because the concept marks the extreme advance, then the reflective return, of a thought that renounces venturing beyond itself, into the aim of the invisible.”⁵¹⁹ The face of African women consciously breaks out

⁵¹⁷ Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 69.

⁵¹⁸ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 11.

⁵¹⁹ Marion, *God without Being*, 30.

of this male-fashioned mold.

In the perspective of this thesis, the face of African women offer us an alternative path rather than a locus for comprehending the divine in a cultural and religious context that arrogantly and idolatrously claims knowledge and visibility of God according to the image and likeness of men. This hubris or idolatrous belief

has led to a distortion in Christian anthropology whereby men have theorized that the fullness of the divine image resides only or primarily in themselves, while women are derivatively or secondarily made in the image and likeness of God and thus subordinate.⁵²⁰

The unassailable face of African women corrects and heals this distortion with their hidden treasure of love, passion, and compassion.

5. God in the Image of African Women: Doorways to the Incomprehensible Mystery of God

When it comes to the conceptualization or the nonconceptualization of God, there is a sense of something greater than us, a mystery beyond our understanding that is profound and deeply comforting at the same time. It is as Marion puts it the idea of “the god-less thinking which must abandon the God of philosophy, God as *causa sui*, [which] is thus perhaps closer to the divine God.”⁵²¹ Besides, as Marion asks theologians and indeed all Christians,

Does not the search for the “more divine god” oblige one, more than to go beyond onto-theo-logy, to go beyond ontological difference as well ... no longer to attempt to think God in view of a being ... hence to think God without pretending to inscribe him or to describe him as a being?⁵²²

In her effort to focus on a God who invites human beings to a path toward transcendence, Johnson holds a similar view.

Image-breaking is a part of religious traditions, because focusing on a

⁵²⁰ Johnson, “The Incomprehensibility of God,” 464.

⁵²¹ Marion, *God without Being*, 35.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 44–45.

fixed image not only compromises the transcendence of God, but petrifies and stultifies human beings into the likeness of the image worshiped, inhibiting growth by preventing further searching for knowledge of God.⁵²³

As with the narrative of Mary Magdalene in chapter 4, the face and experience of many African women such as those presented in chapter 3 enable us to undertake this task of image-breaking to embrace and be embraced by the incomprehensible mystery called God.

So far in this study, I have established the fact that over the years and throughout the history of the church,

the anthropological symbols of Christianity are primarily male ... The symbols of love and power are unfailingly male and tied to obedience. A culture of obedience has developed differently for men than for women ... in such a context God's power seems more important than God's tenderness and love.⁵²⁴

The objects of such emphasis on obedience to power are women, whereas the beneficiaries are male holders of positions of power and authority especially in the patriarchal ecclesiastical hierarchy. I have also made the point that such obsession with power stands in direct contrast to the profound disposition and orientation of African women toward loving, compassionate, and life-giving endeavors. Their maternal desire calls them to love, to give life, and to include, heal, and affirm; their desire to generate a new ethos of life and care for the other is rooted in relationality. Their resiliency in a culture of oppression evinces characteristics of God. It is possible to perceive these characteristics in their naming of the sacred and the divine. I maintain that such naming mirrors their self-understanding as a doorway to the incomprehensible mystery of God.

African women have myriad names for God, but the name they know most intimately in the depth of their being is God who loves. Like Marion, they understand by direct experience borne on the back of self-sacrifice and giftedness that love for God

gives itself only in abandoning itself, ceaselessly transgressing the limits

⁵²³ Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God," 464.

⁵²⁴ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 105.

of its own gift, so as to be transplanted outside of itself. The consequence is that this transference of love outside of itself, without end or limit, at once prohibits fixation on a response, a representation, an idol.⁵²⁵

Their selfless giving embodies and exemplifies God's *kenosis* flowing generously in and through the universe of love. They do not give it a name as if to intentionally possess, control, reproduce, and reduce this reality. Rather, they understand this reality as life that gives life in and out of love, birthing, and nurturing-transformed communities.

Like Lucy at the well in chapter 4, God as life conjures Christological implications. For many of my African sisters and mothers saddled with the life-draining burden of oppression and subordination, Jesus Christ has become Life, or better still, Livingness—not as a man or a human:

The Christ whom African women worship, honor, and depend on is the victorious Christ, knowing that evil is a reality. Death and life-denying forces are the experience of women, and so Christ, who countered these forces and who gave back her child to the widow of Nain, is the African woman's Christ.⁵²⁶

The Life of God within enables women and men to relate to Jesus as the archetype of what the human species should be. This Life begets life and nurtures it in love just as African women beget life in all its manifestations and nurture it in love in the most challenging circumstances imaginable. Consequently and more important, "The Christ of the women of Africa upholds not only motherhood, but all who, like Jesus of Nazareth, perform 'mothering' roles of bringing out the best in all around them."⁵²⁷ Unfortunately, this characteristic of God as exhibited in Jesus escapes the imagination and interest of the male-dominated theology in Africa.

In reality, the person of Jesus reveals the relational God who is known to African women in their capacity for unity and harmony. Thus, for African women, expressing and living out their vocation means, like Jesus,

⁵²⁵ Marion, *God without Being*, 48.

⁵²⁶ Amoah and Oduyoye, "The Christ for African Women," 43.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

incarnating the trinitarian unity-in difference in creation. This incarnation involves unifying in love different persons, genders, races, ethnicities, nations, species, and so on. The world becomes a polyphony of difference. Christ remains the *cantus firmus* of the polyphony.⁵²⁸

This triad of love-life-unity/harmony creates a symphony that echoes from the deepest recesses of the being of African women and traces a doorway to the mystery of the divine whom they mirror and honor in their maternal existence richly nourished by relationality.

The African religious worldview perceives the natural order as infused with a palpable energy and vitality. This order, whether human, animal, or vegetal, emerges as sacred, a junction that connects transcendence with immanence. It thrives on relationality. As Magesa describes this worldview, “it is based on interactive relationships among human beings and between humans and the entire order of existence. It understands this relationship to be the essence of religion, the sacred.”⁵²⁹ Life rooted in relationality is central to the self-understanding of African women and their praxis of self-giving love. In this manner, they also exemplify the core of African spirituality because “this perception of life is at the very heart of African spirituality; it is an approach that is absolutely relational and completely unitary.”⁵³⁰ The African women whom I have encountered in this study understand, embody, and live this truth profoundly.

The image or the face of God reflected in African women is that of love; they love relentlessly and resiliently in acts that commit them to total self-giving. They know the God of love, and their life flows from the God of love. It is futile to search for images to express this experience and reality of African women mirroring the mystery of the divine. There is no image of it; it is an embodied experience that is easily distorted when pressed into antecedently fabricated patriarchal and androcentric categories (or idols). Though they know Jesus as the revelation of God, they are not oblivious to the danger that “Christianity made a human person the center of the religious life in a way that was

⁵²⁸ Kevin Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar: an Irenaean Retrieval* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 57.

⁵²⁹ Magesa, *What is Not Sacred?* 24.

⁵³⁰ Ibid.

unique in the history of religion: it took the personalism inherent in Judaism to an extreme.”⁵³¹ Depending on how this personalism is interpreted and applied, it risks blocking comprehension and can create situations of injustice notably for women.

Karen Armstrong is correct when she notes in the manner of Marion that

a personal God can become a grave liability. He can be a mere idol carved in our own image, a projection of our limited needs, fears and desires. We can assume that he loves what we love and hates what we hate, endorsing prejudices instead of compelling us to transcend them.⁵³²

Besides, as I have argued consistently, theological and religious discourses can create norms and attribute their legitimacy to this personal God while surreptitiously reflecting in these norms the characteristics and proclivities of male domination, privilege, and power. Unsurprisingly, Armstrong writes that the tendency to oppress women is heightened by

the very fact that, as a person, God has a gender ... it means that the sexuality of half the human race is sacralized at the expense of the female and can lead to a neurotic and inadequate imbalance in human sexual mores. A personal God can be dangerous, therefore. Instead of pulling us beyond our limitations, “he” can encourage us to remain complacently within them; “he” can make us as cruel, callous, self-satisfied and partial as “he” seems to be. Instead of inspiring the compassion that could characterize all advanced religion, “he” can encourage us to judge, condemn and marginalize.⁵³³

This biased pattern of imaging the mystery of God appears antithetical to the mirroring of transcendence in love, passion, and compassion, a reality that African women carry in their maternal identity and self-understanding as we saw especially in chapters 2 and 3.

To answer the question, How is it possible to know an incomprehensible God? the Greeks invented a nomenclature that distinguished “God’s essence (*ousia*) and his

⁵³¹ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: the 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1993), 209.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, 209–10.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 210.

‘energies’ (*energeiai*) or activities in the world,” thereby convincing us that “since we could never know God as he is in himself, it was the ‘energies’ not the ‘essence,’ that we experienced in prayer.”⁵³⁴ Radford Ruether agrees with Armstrong that the Christian naming of God is highly influenced by Greco-Roman ideas and philosophies because

unlike Hebrew thought, Greek philosophy raises human (male) consciousness to the same transcendent status as God, outside of and above nature. Human (male) consciousness is seen as partaking of this transcendent realm of male spirit, which is the original and eternal realm of being.⁵³⁵

Vestiges of this Greco-Roman constructs are quite visible in modern deism that installed God at the top of “an intellectual system” totally estranged from lived reality.⁵³⁶

Leaving aside the peculiarities and complexities of Greek-influenced theologies and nomenclature of God, which has endured in Christianity for several centuries, the experience of God in prayer relates to the experience of African women. To speak of God’s activities resonates deeply with the interior experiences of African women. In their intuitiveness and incisive ability to be present in the world through love, they imagine God as active in ways beyond the controlling language of patriarchal theologizing. Their knowledge and understanding of God are simultaneously earthy and transcendent. They grow within God’s “energies” and exhibit those traits in imbibing God’s loving characteristics. Their experience of God “could be described as the ‘rays’ of divinity, which illuminated the world and were an outpouring of the divine, but as distinct from God himself as sunbeams were distinct from the sun.”⁵³⁷

Though silent and ultimately unknowable, the God mirrored and imaged by African women is encountered in love, passion, and compassion. These moments cannot simply be held captive by the abstract jargons and labels of male-controlled theological discourse.⁵³⁸ Not surprisingly, on the contrary, as Fabella and Oduyoye remark incisively,

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 220.

⁵³⁵ Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, 78.

⁵³⁶ See Johnson, *The Quest for the Living God*, 15.

⁵³⁷ Armstrong, *A History of God*, 220.

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

“Women’s theology comes out as words that are lived ... fruits of a *spirituality* and hence *come out of*, and *go beyond*, scholarly pursuits and interests.”⁵³⁹

There is not dearth of names for God in African religious traditions as demonstrated by the following African invocation of divine names:

Ancient deity, unbreakable stone, consoler and comforter providing salvation, watcher of everything who is not surprised by anything, piler of rocks into towering mountains, divider of night and day, sun too bright for our gaze, eye of the sun, drummer of life, owner of the head, large and deep pot, my feathered one, mother of people, great nursing mother, Great eye, great rainbow, great personal guardian spirit, unsurpassed great spirit, great source of being, great mantle which covers us, great leopard with its own forest, great healer of eternal life, great water-giver, great well, greatest of friends, great spider, the all-wise-one, controller of destiny in the universe, all-powerful, never defeated, father of laughter, the one who sees both the inside and the outside, the one we meet everywhere, the one who is in all ages, everywhere and at all times, the one who turns things upside down, the one who makes the sun set, the one who gave everything on this earth and can take everything away, axe that fears no thistle, hoe that fears no soil, victor over death.⁵⁴⁰

In these names for God, we hear echoes of the experiences of African women. In their experience of God, these African women understand that human beings are limited in their comprehension of the divine and

no human concept, word, or image, all of which originate in experience of created reality, can circumscribe the divine reality, nor can any human construct express with any measure of adequacy the mystery of God, who is ineffable.⁵⁴¹

Yet when they pile up rocks around a fire to support a pot to cook a meal for their families, spread themselves out to shelter and protect their families, nurse their children to life, sing of the great spirits, set the hoe to earth to grow food for their communities, trek for miles to draw water to feed and clean their children ... ineffability coincides with spirituality and their personality reveal and celebrate a divinity that defies mere rhetoric,

⁵³⁹ Fabella and Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion*, xii. (Emphasis mine).

⁵⁴⁰ Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 24–25.

⁵⁴¹ Johnson, “The Incomprehensibility of God,” 441.

repels the profane gaze of theological scrutiny, and evades the dungeons of metaphysical categories.⁵⁴² Put simply, God becomes incarnate.

The line of thought I emphasize in this final chapter attempts to catch glimpses of the unknowable and ineffable God in the reality and experience of African women. African women experience God's abiding love in the face of many challenges. In the face of the stigma of HIV/AIDS, for example, they transform their situations into hope by their struggles to care for and heal their families as well as themselves. They smile and hope in the God whose love they know in their experience that is often harsh and life denying. They experience God who is love and who is mirrored as such in their lives.

African women reflect the icon of God if gazed upon in a way that they are not then reduced to or constituted by that gaze. Their interior beings and spiritual constitutions lie deeper and stand taller than a superficial gaze; their beings and spirits reflect the depth of mystery and incomprehensibility that can be recognized in love, passion, compassion, unity, harmony, and prayer. To apply Marion's insightful understanding to this argument, "this gaze always looks beyond what it looks at, it always goes beyond its spectacle, as if ahead of the visible because more fundamentally ahead of itself."⁵⁴³ Little wonder then that "divine unity exists as intrinsic *koinonia* of love, love freely blazing forth, love not just as a divine attitude, affect, or property but as God's very nature: 'God is love (1 Jn 4:16)'."⁵⁴⁴

To gaze upon and contemplate African women in their dignity and worth is to catch a glimpse of the incomprehensible and ineffable mystery of God.

6. Weaving a New Spiritual Identity

The methodological option to base this study of African women on the narrative approach has generated in me an acute awareness of their deep-seated longing and desire for wholeness that emerges as a quest for communion with others and the seeking of a deeper and more meaningful relationship with God and others, not as specimens of

⁵⁴² See Ibid., 442.

⁵⁴³ Marion, *God without Being*, 111.

⁵⁴⁴ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 228; see Marion, *God without Being*, 46.

biological motherhood. In the yearning that flows underneath the experience of exclusion, I have become aware of the unique opportunity for renewal and liberation.

Though the hearts of my African sisters have been burdened by impositions of patriarchy, I have discovered in their lives the fertile soil for change and transformation. As Rita Gross states categorically, “we would never get anywhere in understanding *women* until we changed that basic methodological assumption.”⁵⁴⁵ Her observation that more often than not, women “were studied as objects in an androcentric universe” begs the question of who is telling women’s stories. Gross identifies the concomitant catalyst that has produced some change:

Only when we began to ask why women so rarely appeared on the pages of the books we read, even in the descriptive accounts of religion, did we begin to figure out that the model of humanity we had imbibed from our culture made women invisible or that there were alternatives to that model of humanity.⁵⁴⁶

As it should be clear by now, this thesis is a contextualized study in the sense that I draw upon concrete stories, accounts, and narratives of several African women (especially in the first three chapters), albeit secondarily. However, there are some exceptions, especially in chapter 2, that are primary and direct encounters with some African women. Both indirect and direct encounters provide concrete materials for the kind of theological analysis contained in this study and demonstrate convincingly African women’s desire to break out of the tight corridor of analysis assigned them in the official church and the pain, anguish, and exclusion that accompany this attitude. This is the desire of many women in Africa whose life sentences has been carved out in the terms *motherhood* and *procreation*. It is the only identity of most women in Africa that a patriarchal and androcentric mentality has set in motion. It spells their death!

Judging by the elements surfaced in the previous chapters, I have discovered that

⁵⁴⁵ Rita M. Gross, “Where Have We Been? Where Do We Need to Go?: Women’s studies and Gender in Religion and Feminist Studies,” in *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Ursula King and Tina Beattie (London: Continuum, 2005), 18.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17–18.

the stereotyping of women in Africa as uneducated and subservient to men and their highly patriarchal culture and society is no longer the full story. In chapter 3, I presented many living witnesses and prophetic voices who embody qualities of maternal leadership in Africa. While many African women come to church and society from a patriarchal and male-dominated experience, they are juggling many pieces of their lives and defying all odds to move beyond the roles and burdens assigned to them as wives, mothers, procreators, and caretakers to roles of intelligent and competent leaders, educators, and mentors. They seek wholeness and completeness in who they are as human persons.

Nevertheless, in this quest, as demonstrated in chapter 2, they are confronted by a dilemma: the push and pull of ancient African roots and a colonized understanding of Christianity. Not a few experience rootlessness as a consequence of being pulled out of their cultures compounded by a lack of acceptance of their dignity and gifts in a religion that promises salvation for all. This condition can be described as an anthropological restlessness that has marked many Africans up to today, leading each one to ask, Who are we as African Christians?⁵⁴⁷ Yet on the evidence of this thesis, in reclaiming their true identity, women are realizing there is something much deeper in them that speaks of the God who is endless love and boundless embrace. Like an oyster that is exposed to the grit of the sea, these women are pushed and pulled by their new culture and their new church to produce a kind of pearl—merging African thought patterns with current experience.

As I have discovered in this study, this realization makes for the emergence of a new spirituality that to adapt and adopt the thought of Carmen Nanko-Fernandez for the purposes of this section, entails “an intersection of difference, an embodiment of multiple

⁵⁴⁷ This idea of anthropological restlessness is inspired by the notion of “anthropological poverty,” according to which “centuries of colonial domination of Africa have resulted in a historical psychological conditioning of Africans that manifests itself as a defeatist mentality, a self-perception incapable of envisioning progress, and perpetual confinement in a straightjacket of misery.” Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, “*Caritas in Veritate* and Africa’s Burden of (Under)development” *Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (2010): 320–34.

belongings” that form part of daily living.⁵⁴⁸ This spirituality can come forth only with the labor and pain of birth; in this birthing is the experience of discovering anew the presence of Jesus Christ.

Apropos of this, in speaking of the painful but life-giving experience of Archbishop Romero’s spirituality, Jon Sobrino asserts, “Spirituality was not a spirituality of suffering, to be understood either ascetically or mystically, but rather a spirituality of honor in the face of reality, and thus, necessarily, a spirituality of bearing the burden of reality.”⁵⁴⁹ This study has convinced me that African women embody and practice this spirituality that bears the burden of reality. Yet theirs is not an esoteric experimentation with spirituality; it connects strongly with perspectives, movements, and flows in contemporary spirituality.

For the purposes of clarity, what I call contemporary spirituality is as diverse as are the different groups and peoples of today’s world. Many sources, strains, and strands of spiritualities compete with and encounter one another. One of the most obvious competitions occurs between the traditional way of viewing things and a more modern outlook. Another strain of spirituality can be found between spiritualities that emerge out of culture and ethnicity. One exponent of this might be Bede Griffiths, who focused on the East Indian way of being a spiritual and contemplative person.⁵⁵⁰ Another example is that offered by African theologians who embrace narrative theologies.⁵⁵¹ A third area or strain can be found in those theologies and spiritualities that emerge from the experience of oppression. Certainly, Gustavo Gutiérrez’s frames of reference came out of a culture

⁵⁴⁸ Carmen Nanko-Fernandez, *Theologizing en Espanglish: Context, Community, Ministry* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 57.

⁵⁴⁹ Jon Sobrino, “Monsenor Romero, a Salvadoran and a Christian,” in *Minding the Spirit: the Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 237.

⁵⁵⁰ Bede Griffiths, *Essential Writings*, with an introduction by Thomas Matus (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 45–47.

⁵⁵¹ Examples include Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, and Healey and Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*.

of oppression and led to the creative thinking of liberation theology.⁵⁵²

Elizabeth Johnson⁵⁵³ and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza⁵⁵⁴ are examples of women who have examined and reflected on the oppression of women and how this has affected theology, scriptural interpretation, and of course spirituality. A fourth source generates cosmic spiritualities, for example, Thomas Berry⁵⁵⁵ and Brian Swimme.⁵⁵⁶ A fifth area or strain can be found between the Pentecostal worldview and a more hierarchical way of perceiving reality.⁵⁵⁷

This is not a comprehensive listing of the differences and particularities in contemporary global theologies and spiritualities, but it gives a cross-section of spiritualities in society and makes clear how conflictive and complementary they can be in relation to one another at the same time.

To set the analysis in a wider context, a similar question arises in relation to religion in general. In *The New Catholicity*, Robert Schreiter poses the question regarding how and where religion fits in the global picture. Certainly, religion is something that is present everywhere, but is it possible to even consider this area of concern globally?⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 16–32.

⁵⁵³ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 50.

⁵⁵⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “For Women in Men’s World,” in *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 3.

⁵⁵⁵ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (Bell Tower, NY: Crown, 1999), 2–6.

⁵⁵⁶ Brian Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos: Humanity and the New Story* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 2–5.

⁵⁵⁷ Clive Erricker and Jane Erricker, “Introduction” in *Contemporary Spiritualities: Social and Religious Contexts*, ed. Clive Erricker and Jane Erricker (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), xvi.

⁵⁵⁸ Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 14–15.

The question defies an easy answer. One could pose similar questions regarding spirituality. There are myriad spiritualities throughout the world, and they are migrating all over the world in this era of globalization. When people cross borders, they do not leave their spiritual heritages and baggage behind but take them to new cultural settings and affect people there.⁵⁵⁹

As some of the narratives of African women in this thesis show, they have encountered this challenge of forging a new spirituality rooted in a global perspective and fed from various streams that liberates them from patriarchal domination and from an overemphasis on biological motherhood. They have been faced with the weight of centuries of practice of spirituality that makes this task and quest daunting. Interestingly, those who cannot satisfy their quest for a new spirituality (re)turn to their roots in African religion where they find a measure of spiritual comfort and safety. But for many, even this is not sufficient. Yearning for something that touches their lives on a much deeper level, a number of African women have found a spiritual home in African instituted or independent churches or in Pentecostal groups where they carve out spiritual paths that sustain them. In relation to this phenomenon, Schreiter refers to Peter Beyer's idea that "religion cannot be seen as a global system in the strict sense of the term ... it can mobilize antisystemic feelings in cultures, especially when global systems fail to live up to their ideals of progress, equality, and inclusion."⁵⁶⁰

Religion and its belief systems can provide an arena in which people find answers to some of the most troubling existential questions. Why am I so poor when others have so much? Why are men able to move ahead faster than I can as a woman? What is my relationship with the earth? What I can get from it? Why am I a stranger in this church excluded from so many opportunities for participation and leadership? As Schreiter further affirms, "Religion's holism and commitment to particular cultures gives it moral power against what appears to be alienating and impersonal systems."⁵⁶¹ "Religion as an antisystemic movement can provide the *telos* that a global system lacks, offering a vision

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 15–16.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

of coherence and order.”⁵⁶²

This presence of strong, antisystemic forces in the global arena of competing spiritual and religious movements registers strongly in theological discourses that restrict or exclude women’s participation. Though their “conceptions of spirituality” may differ, even competing and in tension, they provide a bulwark of morality and sanity and “are strong motivating forces within the politics of human communication and ... we ignore this at our peril.”⁵⁶³ Religion counts and spirituality matters in the global world order. With globalization and movements of people from one part of the world to another, there is a need to find a place of unity and oneness even in our diversity.

To come to the salience of this brief excursus on religion in its global context, what Schreiter identifies as “global theological flows” (liberation, feminism, ecology, and human rights) might be a way to speak about the contemporary spiritualities needed for our globalized world of today. For the purposes of this study, they might also provide a template for a more in-depth phenomenology of the spirituality of African women, the focus of the final section.

7. African Women’s Experience Engendering a Liberation Spirituality

The final section of this chapter expounds the content of this spirituality in light of one of Schreiter’s “global theological flows,” namely, liberation. Though to varying degrees, all of this thesis examines the flows of feminism, ecology, and human rights, the foundation should be a spirituality of liberation that forms the basis for a greater awareness among African women of how they can be free as women, how they can understand their relationship with the earth, and how their human rights must be respected.

In making the above connections, I am making a leap from theology to spirituality; this was made clear in the introductory section of this chapter. We can adduce as the rationale for this leap the fact that “in the early centuries every theology took the form of what we today call a ‘spiritual theology’—that it was a reflection carried

⁵⁶² Ibid.

⁵⁶³ Erricker and Erricker, “Introduction,” xvii.

on in function of the following of the Lord, the ‘imitation of Christ’ (*imitatio Christi*).”⁵⁶⁴ Much work has been done by those in the academy and in the field to reintegrate theology and spirituality especially since Vatican II. The history of this reintegration surpasses the scope and purposes of this study.

Of particular salience here is Bevens’s appropriation of Anselm’s definition of theology as “Faith seeking Understanding” to advance an integrated approach to theology, spirituality, and ministry:

How one does theology, lives a spirituality, and performs ministry are all aspects of one’s reality. Spirituality and ministry are both theological acts, and theology has both a spiritual and a ministerial component if it is to be a genuine faith, genuinely seeking genuine understanding.⁵⁶⁵

This process of theologizing is not restricted to professionals in the academy because “every Christian, whenever he or she prays, or when he or she tries to express personal faith and explain it to others or when he or she struggles with his or her own doubts is in fact already doing theology and is already a theologian.”⁵⁶⁶ Besides, there is a very practical and result-oriented dimension to this process precisely because “the knowledge that is the result of our theologizing is a knowledge that leads to the transformation both of ourselves and of our world.”⁵⁶⁷

The processes that Bevens describes here are eminently spiritual. I concur and conclude with Bevens that “theology ... has a strong connection to Christian spirituality ... theological reflection gives spirituality substance.”⁵⁶⁸

Regarding spirituality and theology, Gutiérrez holds that

the solidity and energy of theological thought depend precisely on the spiritual experience that supports it ... Any reflection that does not help in

⁵⁶⁴ Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 36–37.

⁵⁶⁵ Stephen Bevens, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 54–55.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

living according to the Spirit is not a Christian theology ... All authentic theology is spiritual theology.⁵⁶⁹

In another context, Bevans echoes this point when he argues, “Theology must ... be an activity of dialogue, emerging out of a mutual respect between ‘faith-ful’ but not technically trained people and ‘faith-ful’ and listening professionals.”⁵⁷⁰ More precisely, according to Bevans, in the particular context of liberation theology, “Theology is only theology if it issues forth in liberating, transforming action that is subsequently analyzed and reflected upon to produce even more intelligent and faithful action.”⁵⁷¹

Standing on the shoulders of so many African women theologians who have labored for generations for the birth and nurturing of a spirituality of liberation allows me to articulate the following reflections identifying aspects of this spirituality engendered through the experiences of many African women encountered in this thesis and beyond.

7.1. A Spirituality of Freedom

As I have demonstrated in this study, the oppression and domination many African women experience in church and society are not naturally occurring phenomena; they were contrived and deliberately constructed. One of the consequences or outcomes is a feeling of alienation and exclusion compounded by a sense rootlessness and loneliness, the very antithesis of smiling with our own teeth. I hold the position that these painful experiences create a fertile soil for growth and transformation in the analogous manner that *crisis* can occasion *kairos*. This soil creates the environment for renewal, growth, and an awakening to new possibilities.

The ultimate desire of the human person is to be free to be who they were created to be by God. They desire a spirituality that expresses “a walking in freedom according to the Spirit of love and life,”⁵⁷² a spirituality of liberation that involves taking our understanding of liberation from the head to the heart. Furthermore, it entails embarking

⁵⁶⁹ Gutiérrez, *We Drink from our Own Wells*, 36–37.

⁵⁷⁰ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 18.

⁵⁷¹ Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*, 54.

⁵⁷² Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 35.

on a spiritual enterprise that Gutiérrez characterizes as “the passage of a people through the solitude and dangers of the desert, as it carves out its own way in the following of Jesus Christ. This spiritual experience is the well from which we must drink.”⁵⁷³

Schreiter’s observation regarding liberation theology and theologians, that “it is their unstinting denunciation of the plight of the poor and the failures of the rich that have made them such a force to contend with,”⁵⁷⁴ offers us a point of departure for the spirituality of liberation.

From a spiritual perspective, many African women experience multiple forms of poverty—denial of opportunities for participation and leadership, the silencing of their voices, prohibitions and taboos, and maternal mortality among others—in the midst of their spiritual abundance—gifts of the Spirit and the spirits of hospitality, life, joy, community, and others. A spirituality of liberation offers an experience that can mobilize them and prompt the church to enter into solidarity with them.⁵⁷⁵

Beyond the rich/poor divide, many African women live in an ecclesial context in which neither their presence nor their giftedness is always honored, recognized, and celebrated. In this context, theirs is an experience that calls for a particular kind of liberation spirituality. As Phan cautions, and I agree, we must resist the temptation “to lump all liberation theologies together as an undifferentiated theological movement.”⁵⁷⁶ The particularities of what I designate as liberation spirituality or spirituality of liberation consists of walking the bridge across multiple forms of oppression, discrimination, injustice, and gender-based violence toward an experience of maternal flourishing that engenders an ethos of new life rooted in relationality, care for the other, and the nurturing of transformed communities.

7.2. A Spirituality of Commitment to Real Issues

What are the core questions the practitioner of a spirituality of liberation must

⁵⁷³ Ibid., 137.

⁵⁷⁴ See Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 17.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁷⁶ Peter C. Phan, “Method in Liberation Theologies” *Theological Studies* 61, no. 1 (2000): 40.

ask? According to Phan, first, one must identify the structures that are causing the particular oppression, domination, violence, rootlessness, and exclusion. Then, one must ask, who and where are the poor? And one must delve deep into the social, religious, cultural, and political realities that shape the context and identify the causes of the oppression.⁵⁷⁷ One must examine one's own experience and identify the underlying realities that have caused the pain and alienation. In this process, it is possible to generate new insights about the prevailing social, cultural, religious, and political situations.

Second, it is necessary to examine one's own life and to ask, How can the Spirit work in me in such a way that I experience a conversion of heart? To follow Jesus Christ, African women cannot avoid the process of introspection and prayer. As Gilberto Cavazos-Gonzalez contends, "Walking in the footprints of Jesus translates into a profound commitment to the reality of God's reign. This commitment begins with and is confirmed through conversion."⁵⁷⁸ Regarding introspection and prayer leading to conversion, it is pertinent to stress the temptation to assail victims with the blame for their situations of oppression and marginalization.

In the perspective of this study, one of the points of reflection for African women is a critical appraisal of the role of socialization in their approach to religious beliefs, cultural practices, and socioeconomic structures that attempt to rationalize and justify their situation and in the process perpetuate the harm done to women.

Third, from a different perspective, the issues surfaced in by the above-mentioned two points raise the necessity of empowerment. To recall Bevans in chapter 1, if theology is real only when it issues into transformative action, we could expect no less of spirituality. The latter is recognizable in reality as a path or means of empowerment of the poor and marginalized, a fact proponents of liberation theology have demonstrated beyond doubt. Kristof and WuDunn articulate clearly the necessity of empowerment:

"Empowerment" is a cliché in the aid community, but it is truly what is needed. The first step toward greater justice is to transform that culture of female docility and subservience, so that women themselves become more

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ Gilberto Cavazos-Gonzalez, *Beyond Piety: The Christian Spiritual Life, Justice, and Liberation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 86.

assertive and demanding. As we said earlier, that is, of course, easy for outsiders like us to say: We're not the ones who run horrible risks for speaking up. But when a woman does stand up, it's imperative that outsiders champion her; we also must nurture institutions to protect such people. Sometimes we may even need to provide asylum for those whose lives are in danger. More broadly, the single most important way to encourage women and girls to stand up for their rights is education, and we can do far more to promote universal education in poor countries.⁵⁷⁹

This element of the spirituality of liberation could also be understood as a form of solidarity. The commitment, support, encouragement of "outsiders" is imperative for the liberation of those oppressed by multiple ills. To further this reflection, I will draw extensively on the work of Cavazos-Gonzalez.

7.3. A Spirituality of the Way of Christ and Conversion

In forging their unique and liberating spiritual path, African women—just as every believing Christian—must enter into the way of Christ that involves “purgation, illumination, and union.”⁵⁸⁰ From what I have demonstrated in this study, in sundry ways, African women have already entered into the pain of being emptied out or purgation. In a subsequent instance, this spiritual path illuminates their experiences so they can attain a clearer and deeper awareness of their gifts, desires, and possibilities not as hapless victims but as creators of a new spirituality albeit one fed and nourished by a global confluence of streams not restricted to Africa. The result is an integration, a union of the old the new, the familiar and the strange, and the push and pull of life all of which create a new context of mutual recognition, enrichment, and celebration of the gifts of the Spirit and the spirits that African women bring to the community called church.

In many ways, the experience of African women mirrors a conversion process that could be a gift to their own development in Jesus Christ and unleash the potential for opening themselves to the Spirit. This process entails extending themselves to those who are beyond their social, ecclesial, and theological circle to all people who are suffering

⁵⁷⁹ Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, 53.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

from alienation, oppression, domination, or exclusion everywhere.⁵⁸¹

The narrative of Angelina Atyam in chapter 3 best illustrates this experience and process of conversion and the extension of one's circle of concern. Angelina had the option of getting her daughter, Charlotte, back from the rebels who were holding her captive as a sex slave. However, the realization that she was now "a grandmother of a multitude" and that "every child is my child" widened the circle of people of concern who needed her maternal solicitude, care, and protection. Clearly, conversion is not a one-way street; just as it challenges church and society, it challenges women in their quest for a renewing and liberating spiritual experience.

Furthermore, the kind of liberating spirituality indicated here will flourish in its ability to draw on the deeper roots of authentic Christian spiritual traditions.⁵⁸² In line with the approach of Cavazos-Gonzalez, the practice of the spirituality of liberation can provide answers to some of the needs of African women. Cavazos-Gonzalez identifies the roots or "pillars" of this spirituality as "contemplation, poverty, universal fraternity, Eucharist and the cross. These five pillars are how we express and strengthen a liberating Christian spiritual life."⁵⁸³ They constitute signposts for guidance along the path that African women—and indeed anyone traveling the Christian path—must take to move through the process of awakening to their own reality and the conditions they and others around them face.

These "five pillars" are the legacy for any Christian trying to live a life of integrity in Jesus Christ. Entering into prayer, we examine our lives daily. In our

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁸² It is worth pointing out here the incisive observation of Josée Ngalula that many African theologians are deficient in their knowledge of Christian traditions and texts, including scriptural texts, "that affirm the dignity of women." Ngalula calls this deficiency a manifestation of theological illiteracy. See Josée Ngalula, "Milestones in Achieving a more Incisive Feminine Presence in the Church of Pope Francis," in *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016), 32.

⁵⁸³ Cavazos-Gonzalez, *Beyond Piety*, 91.

reflections, we ask, How am I poor? Who are the poor around me and around our ethnic group or tribe? There are many different kinds of poverty—part of a personal discernment is to identify these poverties in ourselves and in others. In this way, through prayer, we awaken to the insight that we are all one in Jesus Christ, that all are our sisters and brothers!

But it is not possible to move to action without the sustaining meal of the Eucharist. Together, we turn to the One who can provide us with the endurance of God's presence without discrimination or judgment in the bread and wine. Finally, we cannot avoid the cross. Life is painful; African women's lives have been painful, and others suffer as well. Going out from ourselves and encountering the pain of the other is part of our Christian vocation. We follow the One who laid down his life by dying on the cross.⁵⁸⁴

The narratives of African women and the analysis of their experience presented in this thesis contain resonances of these five pillars outlined by Cavazos-Gonzalez, aspects of which the women must embrace for the liberation of spirit to take place. They daily contemplate the centrality of God in their lives, the God who leads them from oppression and domination by patriarchy to the freedom of the spirit. They have experienced the poverty of rejection and exclusion, yet their yearning for hospitality, welcome, and inclusion into the one body of Christ around the Eucharistic table has remained undiminished even if it has been occasionally overshadowed by the cross of marginalization. The spiritual trajectory described here is not achieved once and for all; it is an ongoing process.

7.4. A Narrative Spirituality of Transforming and Rekindling the Spirit

John Risley makes the important point that the initial encounter with Christ is the beginning for anyone hoping to develop a spirituality of liberation. Reflection and meditation on the experience of Jesus, the risen Christ, and on the Word of God by Christians are essential. Only after this meeting with the risen Christ do they examine

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., 91–105.

their own situations, experiences, and realities.⁵⁸⁵ According to Risley, “This spirituality ... expresses itself and lives out its dynamic in ‘the preferential option for the poor’ ... It calls us both to interior conversion and to social transformation of structures.”⁵⁸⁶

In Africa, the poor are mostly women. They are socially poor if not always materially so. They are often treated as less than human. In this regard, not only does “social oppression [need] accurate proposals for the restructuring of society,” a similar restructuring is needed in the community called church as well.⁵⁸⁷

The cry of African women is for liberation, and it is very evident in church and society. They want to be free to share who they are as human beings and to flourish in their maternal identities, roles, and experiences. African women are still struggling with the memory of colonial domination and missionary Christianity; this is reflected in their quest to be fully African and fully Christian. There is yet another dimension to this reality; they are faced with a culture and a church that refuse to welcome and embrace their gifts and charisms unconditionally. The kind of spirituality envisaged here is one that will “dig deep into the humus of people’s lives” to listen to and reflect on their narratives of suffering and their yearning for liberation.⁵⁸⁸ Listening to, sharing, and reflecting on narratives of women form an integral part of a liberation spirituality that sets as its goal the transformation of lives and situations of oppression.

As we have seen throughout this study, African women have stories to share; their fears, dreams, aspirations, pain, desires, and need for survival are all stories that when shared and reflected upon as a community of the church reveal “a spirituality in which the spirit of the subject enters into harmony with the spirit of creation ‘groaning’ for

⁵⁸⁵ John Risley, “Liberation Spirituality” *Spirituality Today* 35, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 117, <http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/833523risley.html> (accessed September 15, 2016).

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., 117–26.

⁵⁸⁷ Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 17.

⁵⁸⁸ Cf. Phan, “Method in Liberation Theologies,” 40.

liberty and seeking its fullness, its glory (Rom. 8:18–25).”⁵⁸⁹ In sharing their stories with their own voices and smiling with their own teeth, African women are going through the process of healing and liberation. In identifying the roots of their oppression, their spirits begin to be liberated to embrace freedom for themselves, for God, for others, and for the earth. This contributes much to the life all cultures, peoples, and the earth need to survive the forces of globalization in a post-Christian and postmodern milieu.

Conclusion

David Burrell has posed critical queries that are relevant to the purposes of this chapter: How is it possible to say anything whatsoever of God and be speaking truthfully? In the language of medieval semantics, How can we presume to “name” God? What assures me that I can create a well-formed proposition about God? How can we attribute something to him in a statement we will be able to judge as true or false? After carefully setting up the problem, Aquinas is ready to concede that the whole project “seems ridiculous.”⁵⁹⁰

There is an apparent contradiction in the tenor and tone of the argumentation I have presented in this chapter. Johnson elaborates on the incomprehensibility of God while Marion criticizes idols dressed as divinity. Yet throughout this thesis, I have built up a case for reverencing, affirming, and celebrating African women because they embody, exemplify, and reflect the divine icon. This is a risky proposition that can easily be misconstrued as seeking to replace the idol of patriarchal theology with one couched in feminine characteristics and protected by feminist hermeneutics.

This critique is valid to the extent that it serves as a caution against presumption in our theological speculation, but it is not a deterrent to creatively imaging the incomprehensible mystery of God in a more balanced and holistic hermeneutical, theological, spiritual, and linguistic framework. However, it was necessary, as I did in section 3 of this chapter, to clarify the tenor and the tone of – as well as identify helpful

⁵⁸⁹ Risley, “Liberation Spirituality,” 117–26.

⁵⁹⁰ David B. Burrell, “Aquinas on Naming God” *Theological Studies* 24, no. 2 (June 1, 1963): 183–212 at 184.

signposts and criteria for cultivating – the important attitude and practice of reverencing, affirming, and celebrating African women as people who embody, exemplify, and reflect the divine icon.

I affirm strongly the necessity in theological discourse of awakening to the promises, potential, and opportunities of imaging the divine as female divine. A biased, patriarchal theology turns God into an idol in the Marionian sense by prioritizing and focusing exclusively on maleness as the sole lens for imaging God. As Johnson reminds us, the danger of “focusing on one to the exclusion of the other and clinging to that image has the religious effect of making God less God, at once restrictively expressed and too well known.”⁵⁹¹ The danger is turning God into an idol or having the latter be mistaken for the former.

In reality, as an African woman, part of my objective in this study was to name and affirm “the God who created us human as women and men in the same divine image.”⁵⁹² To accomplish this task, in this chapter, I have drawn on the language of love, passion, compassion, unity, harmony, life, and prayer—experiences that many African women embody and express through their being even in contexts in which their dignity is obscured and trampled upon by artificially created cultural and religious norms. Awareness of and sensitivity to this language opens a path of liberation for African women and all their sisters and mothers held back in church and society that breaks out of the mold of patriarchy, androcentrism, and sexism in religion and theology. Such awareness empowers us to trace in outline an icon of God from strands of love beyond all words and images.

In this sense, Johnson formulates the irony (mystery?) of the complex interplay between transcendence and immanence: “The infinitely creating, redeeming, and

⁵⁹¹ Johnson, “The Incomprehensibility of God,” 464. Johnson also makes the point that the quest for God is a quest “for what is ultimate and whole”; Johnson, *The Quest for the Living God*, 9. A critical component of my argument is that ultimacy and wholeness are undermined by the regnant gender-biased and exclusive imaging of God.

⁵⁹² Oduyoye, “Gender and Theology in Africa Today.”

indwelling Holy One is so far beyond the world and so deeply within the world as to be literally incomprehensible.”⁵⁹³ Words and images fall short, losing the certainty and assurance that patriarchal theologies arrogantly claim.

One of the tangible and immediate outcomes of the process described in the preceding paragraph is that it “will enable men to acknowledge the need to set limits to their presumed right to exercise power over women and help them stop their inclination to play God in the lives of women.”⁵⁹⁴ The God of African women defies and resists such egregious manipulations that patriarchal theologies routinely solidify into oppressive, arrogant, divisive, and insensitive idols. As Jesus of Nazareth declared to Lucy at the well, only a spirituality that is liberating can empower women and men of all races and estates to praise and worship this God in spirit and truth with equal dignity (cf. John 4:24). Such a spirituality restores balance, births wholeness, and bridges the gap between human beings whom God created female and male in God’s own image and likeness (Genesis 1:27, 5:2).

⁵⁹³ Johnson, *The Quest for the Living God*, 17. She also makes the point that our images, symbols, and words for God while of necessity, “many” cannot be taken literally; see 18–22. I agree with Johnson (and Marion) and I hold the position that the failure to take heed of this counsel leads to theological idolatry.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

Concluding Remarks

The church and society need women to take their full place in the world “so that the human race can live in the world without completely losing its humanity.” (*Africae munus*, postsynodal apostolic exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI)

Mothering is a religious duty. It is what a good socio-political and economic systems should be about if the human beings entrusted to the state are to be fully human, nurtured to care for, and take care of themselves, one another, and of their environments. (Mercy Amba Oduyoye)

When the history of African development is written, it will be clear that a turning point involved the empowerment of women. (Molly Melching, quoted in Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*)

The full title of this thesis reads as follows: “African Women as Mothers and Persons in Rhetoric and Practice: a Critical Study of African Womanhood, Maternal Roles, and Identities in Theological and Cultural Constructs within the Roman Catholic Tradition.” It is about African women. Of particular interest and focus are the lives and experiences of poor African women.

In this study, I have applied narrative and story as methodological keys for accessing and appraising the multifaceted experience of many African women. This study shows the value and importance of this methodology. Among many benefits, it gives voice to African women—to their aspirations and yearnings, joys and hopes, pain and anguish.

More significantly, it represents a way of giving voice for them to construct their identities and roles that, as I have demonstrated in this study, form the object of a cultural, religious, economic, and sociopolitical reductionism. Neither natural nor innocuous, the mechanisms of reductionism confine women to their “nature” and “place” as “wives and mothers.” While the former exposes them to subservience and subordination to a rampant patriarchy, the latter mortgages their lives to lifelong risks of death in the process of fulfilling societal expectations and constructs of their role as

means of production and reproduction of male heritage and lineage. In this study, I have uncovered and critiqued the falsehood and fallacies of this reductionist worldview.

This study is significant in that it has allowed me to present a different narrative. More precisely, we have seen multiple narratives. In these narratives, African women are recognized, affirmed, and celebrated as icons of motherhood, a unique gift and a way of being that—far from being confined to biological reproduction—exhibits and models signs of hope for renewed and transformed communities.

To the degree they are open to these narratives of women, such communities, whether in church or society, are inclusive communities. Their character of wholeness bears the seeds of redemption not only for women but also for men in equal measure. In this sense, I have argued for an understanding of motherhood that is liberating and open to women and men. To limit or reduce motherhood to biology is to deprive human beings of the abundance of maternal gifts of women for the renewal of church and transformation of human communities. On the basis of this study, I am convinced that the flourishing of maternal well-being is the first sign of the new creation promised by God in scripture. The primary beneficiary of this fulfillment is the entire human race.

In the course of this study, I have also discovered many lacunae of theological discourse. While theological and ecclesial rhetoric abounds with maternal ecclesial imagery, the concomitant discourse totally overlooks the concrete reality of women's lives in many parts of Africa that are marked for example with excessive cases and elevated rates of maternal mortality. If the theological discourse on the self-understanding of the church is to be credible, authentic, and consistent with its premises and promises, it can no longer ignore the disturbing fact of maternal mortality as valid material for theological and ethical discourse.

What is lacking, therefore, is not the word but the will to arise and act. This study has proved the imperative of this task beyond doubt. Concretely, one of the principal tasks is for the church to pay attention to the unique role of women as integral and equal members of the body of Christ. As shown in this study, the paradox of this reality is that there is no dearth of official rhetoric recognizing and exhorting the church and its leaders to assume responsibility for accomplishing this task. This study should convince the church that words are not enough.

Yet the response from African women theologians to the theological lacunae and the accompanying Christological discourse needs to be sharper and more audacious. African women theologians should no longer content with repeating worn symbols of male representation of the divine, even as liberator; they need to assume with courage and conviction the responsibility for imaging the divine radically and precisely as *feminine divine*. There is precedence for this Christological approach in the history and tradition of the church. We have seen how many contemporary women theologians have demonstrated the viability, necessity, and opportunities of this Christological path. Their works, many of which I have referenced in this study, should be an urgent lesson and a strong impetus for African women theologians.

One source to consider for undertaking this Christological task is African traditional religions, which have a place for the feminine God. In many African mythologies, God, earth, and creation are linked as one entity through a process of birthing and nurturing. In fact, as Nigerian scholar of African religions Jacob Olupona has observed, there is a strong and existential affinity between femininity and the earth. Among the Yoruba and in several African cultures, the earth as mother is the subject of reverence, honor, and veneration:

If a divination texts also refer to the earth as one of the principal deities. She is never conceived of as a commodity or object for exploitation. In some Yoruba mythologies, the earth (mother) is also seen as the opposite of the sky (Either). The union of this cosmic primeval couple produces the animal, plant, and human species that inhabit the world. *Ile* (the earth mother) is often described in human and agricultural images. She is the one who shaves her hair with a hoe (*He afoko yen*). While she carries the burden of the entire world on her head, she equally inherits all the produce and gain that comes from it. The Earth deity is approached first, before any other forms of rituals are offered to other gods.⁵⁹⁵

Furthermore, when represented in imagery and forms, these mythologies prioritize circular symbols. The emphasis is on patterns of relationality and interactions

⁵⁹⁵ Jacob Obafemi Kehinde Olupona, "The Spirituality of Matter: Religion and Environment in Yoruba Tradition, Nigeria," in *Dialogue & Alliance* 9, no. 2 (September 1, 1995): 69–80 at 77.

that promote mutuality, interdependence, and solidarity among human beings and among all the constituents of nature, including spirits and deities.

As I have also demonstrated in this study, there is no shortage of African women who model and image the qualities of the divine in their ordinary existence and work. Women across the continent birth new life and hope for abandoned and abused children; they risk their lives so societies and communities can be transformed to places of reconciliation, justice, and peace. They embrace their duty of care and mothering of all boys and girls traumatized by the evil of war and violence; and they sow hope by empowering other women to acquire the skills and confidence they need to experience human flourishing as *imago Dei*. The sum of their narratives as seen in this study equates a Christological affirmation of the purposes, value, and intent of maternal leadership in church and society. It is about giving life: “I have come that all may have life in full” (John 10:10). The deepest desire of African women is to birth possibilities and opportunities of new life imbedded in relationality, hospitality for the other, and the fostering of renewed and transformed communities.

As I have demonstrated in this study, the warrants for affirming the life-giving roles and identities of African women run deep in Christian tradition and scriptural heritage. Granted, both have been used to silence and oppress women but only because for the longest time only a gender-biased hermeneutical key was allowed and applied to unlock the treasures and promises of Christian tradition and scriptural heritage. This study has provided a different reading of these sources, particularly of the scripture, that shows how women are conferred dignity, authority, credibility, and authenticity as disciples of the risen Christ. Their mandate to teach, preach, and proclaim the good news of the risen Christ with joy and confidence springs from their encounter with Christ.

Based on the findings of this study, the evidence of scriptural narrative has implications for how women’s contributions and participation are received in the community called church. The latter is called and challenged to practice inclusion in ministry. Besides, this entails engendering an inclusive ecclesiological discourse that welcomes, values, and embraces the gifts and participation of women. The idea of ecclesial inclusivity is not an invention of this study; it is unmistakably present in Vatican II, particularly in the notion of the church as the people of God we find in *Lumen gentium*

and *Gaudium et spes*. Vatican II is clear about the criteria for membership and participation in the church. Besides the gift of baptism that incorporates each member into the body of Christ, the Holy Spirit empowers the community for a variety of ministries for which the Spirit also supplies the necessary charisms. Thus, rather than propounding a new teaching, this study calls for actualization of the church's teaching—practicing what it preaches. If bishops, priests, and all members of the people of God resolve to practice what they preach, the identity of the church as a reconciled, whole, and equal community of women and men redeemed and missioned by the risen Christ will cease being a matter of stirring rhetoric and become a way of life of the church all over the world.

How women engage and participate in church and society would not be simply a perpetuation of a gender-biased model modified only in its intensity by a token allotment of subsidiary roles to them. Women's form of ecclesial participation and contribution are animated with energy and vibrancy, passion and compassion, as concrete manifestations of their maternal leadership. Thus, for the women of Africa, who embody in their lives and works the gifts of the Spirit, the church is their home, their family, and their field of ministry.

As was mentioned in chapter 5, the energy and vibrancy of African women are evident in other domains that nurture, support, and protect the life of the family. To mention but one instance, African women have always embodied an inexhaustible energy for family food production. They are the ones who pray and hope for rain; they labor to sow and cultivate, and they worry endlessly in anticipation of a good harvest. They pour their souls into the growing of bitter leaf (*ewura*), of spinach (*efo tete*), and of okra and tomatoes to feed their families and take to market.⁵⁹⁶ African women sing to the fields and engage with the energies of life in the plants, in the animals, and in their family. In a real sense, they epitomize the feminine divine in visible form. I submit there are abundant materials and resources here for African women theologians for imaging the divine as female divine.

⁵⁹⁶ www.9jafoodie.com/2013/06/nigerian-leafy-vegetables 9jafoodie (accessed November 8, 2016).

Undoubtedly, the very notion of family extended to the church conjures the image of an inclusive community of women, men, and children. In the particular sociological and cultural context of Africa, this community extends beyond the nuclear family and takes in an array of relationship, networks, and interconnections.

As I have argued in this study, however, the value of this metaphor of church as family as a catalyst for inclusion, participation, and hospitality functions optimally only when women are not relegated to the background as servers and maids to the menfolk. I hold firmly the position that the ability and opportunity of women to share their gifts as equal partners and collaborators is a critical source of renewal for the church and for human society. Equality in ministry is a synonym for dignity, empowerment, and flourishing. A church that embraces equality in ministry listens to the conversations going on in the community, hears the voices of all the members of the community, and supports the integration and participation of all the members of the community. It is the antithesis of clerical monopoly and obsession with privilege and power.

The effective application and realization of the image of church that emerges from this study model the church as community of service transformed by the profound conversion of the leadership and membership of the church. In this study, one way of characterizing my argument is to see it as a theological advocacy for human flourishing in church and society especially in its maternal form.

That the church in Africa has yet to fully recognize and utilize the gifts of women to truly claim its identity as community of the risen Christ is symptomatic of a serious mark on its self-understanding. An ecclesial community that recognizes, welcomes, affirms, and integrates the charisms and gifts of women is one that is fully alive and truly reconciled in the Spirit. It is a church that embraces and honors the gifts of every member of the community for ministry and service with wide-opened arms. Thus stated, ecclesial leadership that understands its role as the service and promotion of reconciliation, justice, and peace—as the second African synod claimed—recognizes that the Spirit of the risen Christ freely and generously endows the people of God with a multiplicity of gifts for the edification of the body of Christ. As Paul reminded the Christian community in Corinth, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to God’s self through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18).

It would be illusory to conclude based on this study that the obstacles women face in church and society are easily surmountable. On the contrary, history shows the stubbornness of the proclivity for domination and oppression of one gender by another in church and society. While a frontal attack might seem advised, I have argued for the path of a spirituality of liberation so theological discourse will not evaporate into ethereal speculation. On the contrary, it will assume its task of naming the root causes of oppression, denouncing the custodians of patriarchal domination, and proclaiming the advent of a new dawn of hope for liberation for all women and men.

Spirituality, then, not religion, is the goal of the quest of many African women for liberation. For it to be authentic, credible, and impactful, such spirituality must be empowering, allowing and calling forth women to name the forces that oppress them, to shake off the shackles that bind them, to undo the gags that silence them, and to transform cultural assumptions that render them docile and subservient. Furthermore, it is a spirituality that calls and empowers them to raise their voices, stand for their beliefs, assert their roles, and construct their identities as human persons created in the image and likeness of the merciful, compassionate, and just God.

In light of the foregoing and in line with the overall goal of this thesis, the way forward entails a conversion of both male and female manifested in a commitment to a new way of being for all human persons.

My profound conviction and wish in this study is an appeal to the leadership of the church in Africa and the world church to pay heed to the realities of women's lives—experiences such as maternal mortality—and to give women the opportunity to cultivate and discover the gifts in their particular cultures, communities, and experiences. That is why I have argued that to restore its authentic self-understanding, the church must take as a matter of urgency making good its own words on the inclusion of women on all levels of participation in the church. If the community of the risen Christ can find its unity in equality and dignity, compassion and solidarity, communion and hospitality with each other and the marginalized as Jesus of Nazareth did, we would all grow deeper and richer in our Christian calling and renew and transform the church and the world. In this way, the risen Christ would have taken root in each heart, soul, and being. The dignity of the human person would be realized—male and female created equally in the image and

likeness of God.

To recall the words of Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, “The Church and society need women to take their full place in the world ‘so that the human race can live in the world without completely losing its humanity’.” Benedict sums up a plethora of rhetoric that abounds in the official statements, documents, encyclicals, and exhortations of the church in Africa and of the world church. In this rhetoric lies an urgent invitation: both church and society “need women.” If church and society remain deaf to this clarion call and persist in denying women their full place in the world, the total loss of humanity should be accepted as the future and permanent condition of the human race in church and in society. There are no other options.

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